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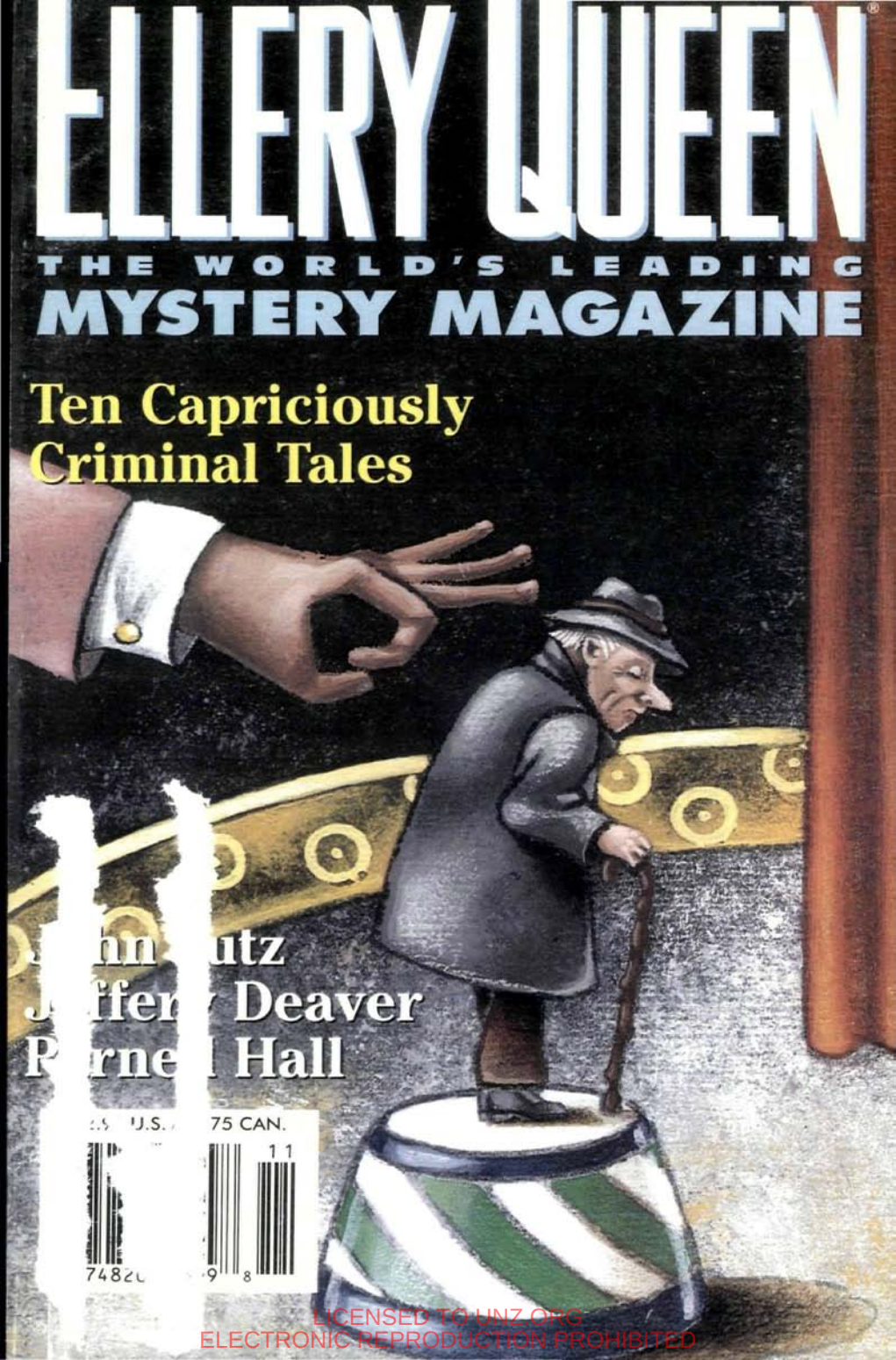

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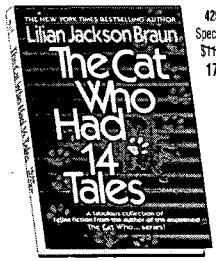

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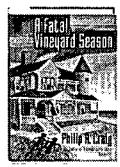

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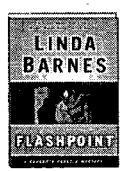

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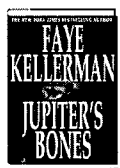

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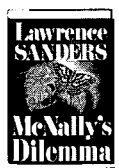

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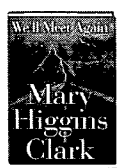

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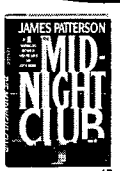

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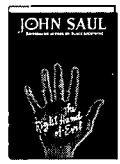

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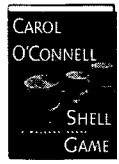

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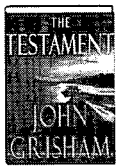

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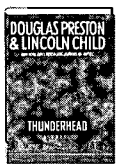

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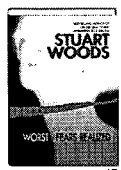

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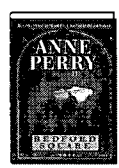

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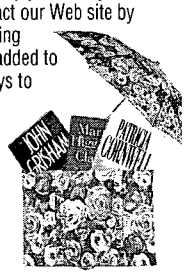

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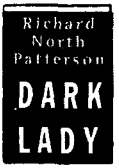

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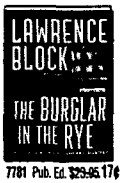

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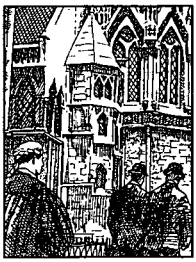

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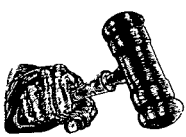

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FOR SERVICES RENDERED

by Jeffery Deaver

"At first I thought it was me . . . but now I know for sure: My husband's trying to drive me crazy."

Dr. Harry Bernstein nodded and, after a moment's pause, dutifully noted his patient's words on the steno pad resting on his lap.

"I don't mean he's *irritating* me, driving me crazy that way—I mean he's making me question my sanity. And he's doing it on purpose."

Patsy Randolph, facing away from Harry on his leather couch, turned to look at her psychiatrist. Even though he kept his Park Avenue office quite dark during his sessions, he could see that there were tears in her eyes.

"You're very upset," he said in a kind tone.

"Sure, I'm upset," she said. "And I'm scared."

This woman, in her late forties, had been his patient for two months. She'd been close to tears several times during their sessions but had never actually cried. Tears are important barometers of emotional weather. Some patients go for years without

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crying in front of their doctors, and when the eyes begin to water, any competent therapist sits up and takes notice.

Harry studied Patsy closely as she turned away again and picked at a button on the cushion beside her thigh.

"Go on," he encouraged. "Tell me about it."

She snagged a Kleenex from the box beside the couch, dabbed at her eyes. But she did so carefully; as always, she wore impeccable makeup.

"Please," Harry said in a soft voice.

"It's happened a couple of times now," she began reluctantly. "Last night was the worst. I was lying in bed and I heard this voice. I couldn't really hear it clearly at first. Then it said . . ."

She hesitated. "It said it was my father's ghost."

Motifs in therapy didn't get any better than this, and Harry paid close attention.

"You weren't dreaming?"

"No, I was awake. I couldn't sleep and I'd gotten up for a glass of water. Then I started walking around the apartment. Just pacing. I felt frantic. I lay back in bed. And the voice—I mean, *Pete's* voice—said that it was my father's ghost."

"What did he say?"

"He just rambled on and on. Telling me about all kinds of things from my past. Incidents from when I was a girl. I'm not sure. It was hard to hear."

"And these were things your husband knew?"

"Not all of them." Her voice cracked. "But he could've found them out. Looking through my letters and my yearbooks."

"You're sure he was the one talking?"

"The voice sounded sort of like Peter's. Anyway, who else would it be?" She laughed, her voice nearly a cackle. "I mean, it could hardly be my father's ghost, now, could it?"

"Maybe he was just talking in his sleep."

She didn't respond for a minute. "See, that's the thing . . . He wasn't in bed. He was in the den, playing some video game."

Harry continued to take his notes.

"And you heard him from the den?"

Within a month of this issue going to print, Universal Pictures will release the long-awaited motion picture of Jeffery Deaver's novel *The Bone Collector*: The film stars Denzel Washington. Several of Mr. Deaver's earlier novels also attracted the attention of filmmakers, including *A Maiden's Grave*, which was a 1996 HBO movie. A new Deaver novel, *The Devil's Teardrop*, is due from S&S just ahead of the movie.

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"He must have been at the door. . . . Oh, Doctor, it sounds ridiculous. I know it does. But I think he was kneeling at the door—it's right next to the bedroom—and was whispering."

"Did you go into the den? Ask him about it?"

"I walked to the door real fast, but by the time I opened it he was back at the desk." She looked at her hands and found she'd shredded the Kleenex. She glanced at Harry to see if he'd noticed the compulsive behavior, which of course he had, and then stuffed the tissue into the pocket of her expensive beige slacks.

"And then?"

"I asked him if he'd heard anything, any voices. And he looked at me like I was nuts and went back to his game."

"And that night you didn't hear any more voices?"

"No."

Harry studied his patient. She'd been a pretty girl in her youth, Harry supposed, because she was a pretty woman now. Her face was sleek and she had the slightly upturned nose of a Connecticut socialite who debates long and hard about having rhinoplasty but never does. He recalled that Patsy'd told him her weight was never a problem; she'd hire a personal trainer whenever she gained five pounds. She'd said—with irritation masking secret pride—that men often tried to pick her up in bars and coffee shops.

He asked, "You say this's happened before? Hearing the voice?"

Another hesitation. "Maybe two or three times. All within the past couple of weeks."

"But why would Harry want to drive you crazy?"

Patsy, who'd come to Harry presenting with the classic symptoms of a routine midlife crisis, hadn't discussed her husband much yet. Harry knew he was good-looking, a few years younger than Patsy, not particularly ambitious. They'd been married for three years—second marriages for both of them—and they didn't seem to have many interests in common. But of course, that was just Patsy's version. The "facts" that are revealed in a therapist's office can be very fishy. Harry Bernstein worked very hard to be a human lie detector and his impression of the marriage was that there was much unspoken conflict between husband and wife.

Patsy considered his question. "I don't know. I was talking to Sally . . . " Harry remembered her mentioning Sally, her best friend. She was another Upper East Side matron—one of the ladies who lunch—and was married to the president of one of the biggest banks in New York. "She said that maybe Peter's jealous of me. I mean, look at us—I'm the one with the social life, I have the friends, I have the money . . . " He noticed a manic edge to her voice. She did, too, and controlled it. "I just don't *know* why he's doing it. But he is."

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"Have you talked to him about this?"

"I tried. But naturally he denies everything." She shook her head and tears swelled in her eyes again. "And then . . . the birds."

"Birds?"

Another Kleenex was snagged, used, and shredded. She didn't hide the evidence this time. "I have this collection of ceramic birds. Made by Boehm. Do you know about the company?"

"No."

"They're very expensive. They're German. Beautifully made. They were my parents'. When our father died, Steve and I split the inheritance, but he got most of the personal family heirlooms. That really hurt me. But I did get the birds."

Harry knew that her mother had died ten years ago and her father about three years ago. The man had been very stern and had favored Patsy's older brother, Stephen. He was patronizing to her all her life.

"I have four of them. There used to be five, but when I was twelve I broke one. I ran inside—I was very excited about something and I wanted to tell my father about it—and I bumped into the table and knocked one off. It broke. My father spanked me with a willow switch and sent me to bed without dinner."

Ah, an Important Event. Harry made a note but didn't pursue the incident any further at the moment.

"And?"

"The morning after I heard my father's ghost for the first time . . ." Her voice grew harsh. "I mean, the morning after *Peter* started whispering to me . . . I found one of the birds broken. It was lying on the living room floor. I asked Peter why he'd done it—he knows how important they were to me—and he denied it. He said I must have been sleepwalking and did it myself. But I know I didn't. Peter had to've been the one." She'd slipped into her raw, irrational voice again.

Harry glanced at the clock. He hated the legacy of the psychoanalysts: the perfectly timed fifty-minute hour. There was so much more he wanted to delve into. But patients need consistency and, according to the old school, discipline. He said, "I'm sorry but I see our time's up."

Dutifully, Patsy rose. Harry observed how disheveled she looked. Yes, her makeup had been very carefully applied, but the buttons on her blouse weren't done properly. Either she'd dressed in a hurry or hadn't paid attention. One of the straps on her expensive tan shoes wasn't hooked.

She rose. "Thank you, Doctor. . . . It's good just to be able to tell someone about this."

"We'll get everything worked out. I'll see you next week."

After Patsy had left the office, Harry Bernstein sat down at his

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desk. He spun slowly in his chair, gazing at his books—the *DSM-IV, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* the APA *Handbook of Neuroses,* volumes by Freud, Adler, Jung, Karen Horney, hundreds of others. Then out the window again, watching the late afternoon sunlight fall on the cars and taxis speeding north on Park Avenue.

A bird flew past.

He thought about the shattered ceramic sparrow from Patsy's childhood: What a significant session this had been.

Not only for his patient. But for him too.

Patsy Randolph—who had, until today, been just another mildly discontented middle-aged patient—represented a watershed event for Dr. Harold David Bernstein. He was in a position to change her life completely.

And in doing so, he could redeem his own.

Harry laughed out loud, spun again in the chair, like a child on a playground. Once, twice, three times.

A figure appeared in the doorway. "Doctor?" Miriam, his secretary, cocked her head, which was covered with fussy white hair. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Why're you asking?"

"Well, it's just . . . I don't think I've heard you laugh for a long time. I don't think I've *ever* heard you laugh in your office."

Which was another reason to laugh. And he did.

She frowned, concern in her eyes.

Harry stopped smiling. He looked at her gravely. "Listen, I want you to take the rest of the day off."

She looked mystified. "But . . . it's quitting time, Doctor. I was going to—"

"Joke," he explained. "It was a joke. See you tomorrow."

Miriam eyed him cautiously, unable, it seemed, to shake the quizzical expression from her face. "You're sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Good night."

"'Night, Doctor."

A moment later he heard the front door to the office click shut.

He spun around in his chair once more, reflecting: Patsy Randolph . . . I can save you and you can save me.

And Harry Bernstein was a man badly in need of saving.

Because he hated what he did for a living.

Not the business of helping patients with their mental and emotional problems—oh, he was a natural-born therapist. None better. What he hated was practicing Upper East Side psychiatry out of a stuffy office. It had been the last thing he'd ever wanted to do. But in his second year of Columbia Medical School, the tall, handsome student met the tall, beautiful assistant development director of the Museum of Modern Art. Harry and Linda were married

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before he started his internship. He moved out of his fifth-floor walkup near Harlem and into her townhouse on East Eighty-First. Within weeks she'd begun changing his life. Linda was a woman who had high aspirations for her man (very similar to Patsy, in whose offhand comment several weeks ago about her husband's lack of ambition Harry had seen reams of anger). Linda wanted money, she wanted to be on the regulars list to benefits at the Met, she wanted to be pampered at four-star restaurants in Eze and Monaco and Paris.

A studious, easy-going man from a modest suburb of New York, Harry knew that by listening to Linda he was headed in the wrong direction. But he was in love with her so he *did* listen. They bought a co-op in a high-rise on Madison Avenue and he hung up his shingle (well, a heavy brass plaque) outside this three-thousand-dollar-a-month office on Park and Seventy-Eighth Street.

At first Harry had worried about the astronomical bills they were amassing. But soon the money was flowing in. He had no trouble getting business; there's no lack of neuroses among the rich, and the insured, on the isle of Manhattan. He was also very good at what he did. His patients came and they liked him and so they returned weekly.

"Nobody understands me, sure we've got money but money isn't everything and the other day my housekeeper looks at me like I'm from outer space and it's not my fault and I get so angry when my mother wants to go shopping on my one day off and I think Samuel's seeing someone and I think my son's gay and I just cannot lose these fifteen pounds . . ."

Their troubles may have been plebeian, even laughably minor at times, but his oath, as well as his character, wouldn't let Harry minimize them. He worked hard to help his patients.

And all the while he neglected what he really wanted to do. Which was to treat severe mental cases. People who were paranoid schizophrenics, people with bipolar depression and borderline personalities—people who led sorrowful lives and couldn't hide from that sorrow with the money that Harry's patients had.

From time to time he volunteered at various clinics—particularly a small one in Brooklyn that treated homeless men and women—but with his Park Avenue caseload and his wife's regimen of social obligations there was no way he could devote much time to the practice. He'd wrestled with the thought of just chucking his practice and working at the clinic full-time. Of course, if he'd done that, his income would have dropped by ninety percent. He and Linda had had two children a couple of years after they'd gotten married—two sweet daughters whom Harry loved very much—and their needs, very expensive needs, private school

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sorts of needs, took priority over his personal contentment. Besides, as idealistic as he was in many ways, Harry knew that Linda would have left him in a flash if he'd quit his practice and started working full-time in Brooklyn.

But the irony was that even after Linda *did* leave him—for someone she'd met at one of the society benefits that Harry couldn't bear to attend—he hadn't been able to spend any more time at the clinic than he had when he'd been married. The debts Linda had run up while they were married were excruciating. His older daughter was in an expensive college, and his younger was on her way to Vassar next year.

Yet, out of the dozens of patients who whined about minor dissatisfactions, here came Patsy Randolph, a truly desperate patient . . . a woman telling him about ghosts, about her husband trying to drive her insane, a woman clearly on the brink.

A patient, at last, who would give Harry a chance to redeem his life.

That night he didn't bother with dinner. He came home and went straight into his den, where sat stacked in high piles a year's worth of professional journals that he'd never bothered to read since they dealt with serious psychiatric issues and didn't much affect the patients in his practice.

He kicked his shoes off and began sifting through them, taking notes. He found Internet sites devoted to psychotic behavior and he spent hours on-line, downloading articles that could help him with Patsy's situation.

Harry was rereading an obscure article in the *Journal of Psychoses,* which he'd been thrilled to find—it was the key to dealing with her case—when he sat up, hearing a shrill whistle. He'd been so preoccupied that he'd forgotten he'd put on the tea kettle for coffee. . . . But then he glanced out the window and realized that it wasn't the kettle at all. The sound was from a bird sitting on a branch nearby, singing. The hour was well past dawn.

At her next session Patsy looked worse than she had the week before. Her clothes weren't pressed. Her hair was matted and hadn't been shampooed for days, it seemed. Her white blouse was streaked with dirt and the collar was torn. Her skirt was rumpled, too, and there were runs in her stockings. Only her makeup was carefully done.

"Hello, Doctor," she said in a soft voice. She sounded timid.

"Hi, Patsy, come on in. . . . No, not the couch today. Sit across from me."

She hesitated. "Why?"

"I think we'll postpone our usual work and deal with this crisis. About the voices. I'd like to see you face-to-face."

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"Crisis." She repeated the word warily as she sat in the comfortable armchair across from his desk. She crossed her arms, looked out the window—these were all body-language messages that Harry recognized well. They meant she was nervous and defensive.

"Now, what's been happening since I saw you last?" he asked.

She told him. There'd been more voices—her husband kept pretending to be the ghost of her father, whispering terrible things to her. What, Harry asked, had the ghost said? She answered: What a bad daughter she'd been, what a terrible wife she was now, what a shallow friend. Why didn't she just kill herself and quit bringing pain to everyone's life?

Harry jotted a note. "It was your father's voice?"

"Not my *father,"* she said, her voice cracking with anger. "It was my *husband,* pretending to be my father. I told you that."

"Where was Peter when you heard him?"

She studied a bookshelf. "He wasn't exactly home."

"He wasn't?"

"No. He went out for cigarettes. But I figured out how he did it. He must've rigged up some kind of a speaker and tape recorder. Or maybe one of those walkie-talkie things." Her voice faded. "Peter's also a good mimic. You know, doing impersonations. So he could do *all* the voices."

"*All* of them?"

She cleared her throat. "There were more ghosts this time." Her voice rising again, manically. "My grandfather. My mother. Others. I don't even know who." Patsy stared at him for a moment, then looked down. She clicked her purse latch compulsively, then looked inside, took out her compact and lipstick. She stared at the makeup then put it away. Her hands were shaking.

Harry waited a long moment then asked, "Patsy . . . I want to ask you something."

"You can ask me anything, Doctor."

"Just assume—for the sake of argument—that Peter wasn't pretending to be the ghosts. Where else could they be coming from?"

She snapped, "You don't believe a word of this, do you?"

The most difficult part of being a therapist is making sure your patients know you're on their side while pursuing the truth. He said evenly, "It's certainly possible what you're saying. But I think you should consider that there's another possibility."

"Which is?"

"That you did hear something—maybe your husband on the phone, maybe the TV, maybe the radio, but whatever it was had nothing to do with your father's ghost. You projected your own thoughts onto what you heard."

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"You're saying it's all in my head."

"I'm saying that maybe the words themselves are originating in your subconscious. What do you think about that?"

She considered this for a moment. "I don't know. . . . It could be. I suppose that makes some sense."

Harry smiled. "That's good, Patsy. That's a good first step, admitting that."

She seemed pleased, a student who'd been given a gold star by a teacher.

Then the psychiatrist grew serious. "Now, one thing—when the voices talk about hurting yourself . . . you're not going to listen to them, are you?"

"No, I won't." She offered a brave smile. "Of course not."

"Good." He glanced at the clock. "I see our time's just about up, Patsy. I want you to do something. I want you to keep a diary of what the voices say to you."

"A diary? All right."

"Write down everything they say and in a month or so we'll go through it together."

She rose. Turned to him. "Maybe I should just ask one of the ghosts to come along to a session. . . . But then you'd have to charge me double, wouldn't you?"

He laughed. "See you next week."

At three o'clock the next morning, Harry was wakened by a phone call.

"Dr. Bernstein?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Officer Kavanaugh, with the police department."

Sitting up, trying to shake off his drowsiness, he thought immediately of Herb, a patient at the clinic in Brooklyn. The poor man, a mild schizophrenic who was completely harmless, was forever getting beat up because of his gruff, threatening manner.

But that wasn't the reason for the call.

"You're Mrs. Patricia Randolph's psychiatrist. Is that correct?" the officer continued.

His heart thudded hard. "Yes, I am. Is she all right?"

"We've had a call . . . We found her in the street outside her apartment. No one's hurt, but she's a bit hysterical."

"I'll be right there."

When he arrived at the Randolphs' apartment building, ten blocks away, Harry found Patsy and her husband in the front lobby. A uniformed policeman stood next to them.

Harry knew that the Randolphs were wealthy, but the building was much nicer than he'd expected. It was one of the luxurious

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high-rises that Donald Trump had built in the eighties. There were penthouse triplexes selling for twenty million, Harry had read in the *Times*.

"Doctor," Patsy cried when she saw Harry. She ran to him. Harry was careful about physical contact with his patients. He knew all about transference and countertransference—the perfectly normal attraction between patients and their therapists—but contact had to be handled carefully. Harry took Patsy by the shoulders so that she couldn't hug him and led her back to the lobby couch.

"Mr. Randolph?" Harry asked, turning to him.

"That's right."

"I'm Harry Bernstein."

The men shook hands. Peter Randolph was very much what Harry was expecting. He was a trim, athletic man of about forty. Handsome. His eyes were angry and bewildered. He reminded Harry of a patient he'd treated briefly—a man whose sole complaint was that he was having trouble maintaining a life with a wife and two mistresses. Peter wore a burgundy silk bathrobe and supple leather slippers.

"Would you mind if I spoke to Patsy alone?" Harry asked him.

"No. I'll be upstairs if you need me." He said this to both Harry and the police officer.

Harry glanced at the cop, too, who also stepped away and let the doctor talk to his patient.

"What happened?" Harry asked Patsy.

"The bird," she said, choking back tears.

"One of the ceramic birds?"

"Yes," she whispered. "He broke it."

Harry studied her carefully. She was in bad shape tonight. Hair stringy, robe filthy, fingernails unclean. As in her session the other day, only her makeup was normal.

"Tell me about what happened."

"I was asleep and then I heard this voice say, 'Run! You have to get out. They're almost here. They're going to hurt you.' And I jumped out of bed and ran into the living room and there—there was the Boehm bird. It was broken. The robin. It was shattered and scattered all over the floor. I started screaming—because I knew they were after me." Her voice rose. "The ghosts . . . They . . . I mean, Peter was after me. I just threw on my robe and ran."

"And what did Peter do?"

"He ran after me."

"But he didn't hurt you?"

She hesitated. "No." She looked around the cold, marble lobby with paranoid eyes. "Well, what he did was, he called the

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police. . . . But don't you see? Peter didn't have any choice. He *had* to call the police. Isn't that what somebody would normally do if their wife ran out of the apartment screaming? He had to shift suspicion away from him." Her voice faded.

Harry looked for signs of overmedication or drinking. He could see none. She looked around the lobby once more.

"Are you feeling better now?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. "Making you come all the way over here tonight."

"That's what I'm here for. . . . Tell me: You don't hear any voices now, do you?"

"No."

"And the bird? Could it have been an accident?"

She thought about this for a moment. "Well, Peter *was* asleep . . . Maybe I was looking at it earlier and left it on the edge of the table." She sounded perfectly reasonable. "Maybe the housekeeper did it."

The policeman looked at his watch and then ambled over. He asked, "Can I talk to you, Doctor?"

They stepped into a corner of the lobby.

"I'm thinking I oughta take her downtown," the cop said in a Queens drawl. "She was pretty outta control before. But it's your call. You think she's E.D.?"

Emotionally disturbed. That was the trigger diagnosis for involuntary commitment. If he said yes, Patsy would be taken off and hospitalized.

This was the critical moment. Harry debated.

I can help you and you can help me. . . .

He said to the cop, "Give me a minute."

He returned to Patsy, sat down next to her. "We have a problem. The police want to take you away. And if you claim that Peter's trying to drive you crazy or hurt you, the fact is, the judge just isn't going to believe you. And they're going to put you into custody."

"Me? *I'm* not doing anything! It's the voices! It's them . . . I mean, it's Peter."

"But they're not going to believe you. That's just the way it is. Now, you can go back upstairs and carry on with your life or they can take you downtown to the city hospital. And you don't want that. Believe me. Can you stay in control?"

She lowered her head to her hands. Finally she said, "Yes, Doctor, I can."

"Good. . . . Patsy, I want to ask you something else. I want to see your husband alone. Can I call him, have him come in?"

"Why?" she asked, her face dark with suspicion.

"Because I'm your doctor and I want to get to the bottom of what's bothering you."

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She glanced at the cop. Gave him a dark look. Then she said to Harry, "Sure."

"Good."

After Patsy'd disappeared into the elevator car the cop said, "I don't know, Doctor. She seems like a nut case to me. Things like this . . . they can get real ugly. I've seen it a million times."

"She's got some problems, but she's not dangerous."

"You're willing to take that chance?"

After a moment he said, "Yes, I'm willing to take that chance."

"How was she last night, after I left?" Harry asked Peter Randolph the next morning. The two men sat in Harry's office.

"She seemed all right. Calmer." Peter sipped the coffee that Miriam had brought him. "What exactly is going on with her?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "I can't discuss the specifics of your wife's condition with you. Confidentiality."

Peter's eyes flared angrily for a moment. "Then why did you ask me here?"

"Because I need you to help me treat her. You do want her to get better, don't you?"

"Of course I do. I love her very much." He sat forward in the chair. "But I don't understand what's going on. She was fine until a couple of months ago—when she started seeing *you,* if you have to know the truth. Then things started to go bad."

"When people see therapists they sometimes confront things that they never had to deal with. I think that's Patsy's situation. She's getting close to some important issues. And that can be very disorienting."

"She claims I'm pretending to be a ghost," Peter said sarcastically. "That seems a little worse than just disoriented."

"She's in a downward spiral. I can pull her out of it . . . but it'll be hard. And I'll need your help."

Peter shrugged. "What can I do?"

Harry explained, "First of all, you can be honest with me."

"Of course."

"For some reason she's come to associate you with her father. She has a lot of resentment toward him, and she's projecting that on you. Do you know why she's mad at you?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Go on, tell me. Anything you say here is confidential—between you and me."

"She might have this stupid idea that I've cheated on her."

"Have you?"

"Where the hell do you get off, asking a question like that?"

Harry said reasonably, "I'm just trying to get to the truth."

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Randolph calmed down. "No, I haven't cheated on her. She's paranoid."

"And you haven't said or done anything that might trouble her or affect her sense of reality."

"No," Peter said.

"How much is she worth?" Harry asked bluntly.

Peter blinked. "You mean, her portfolio?"

"Net worth."

"I don't know exactly. About eleven million."

Harry nodded. "And the money's all hers, isn't it?"

A frown crossed Peter Randolph's face. "What're you asking?"

"I'm asking, if Patsy were to go insane or to kill herself, would you get her money?"

"Go to hell!" Randolph shouted, standing up quickly. For a moment Harry thought the man was going to hit him. But he pulled his wallet from his hip pocket and took out a card. Tossed it onto Harry's desk. "That's our lawyer. Call him and ask him about the prenuptial agreement. If Patricia's declared insane, or if she were to die, the money goes into a trust. I don't get a penny."

Harry pushed the card back. "That won't be necessary. . . . I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," Harry said. "My patient's care comes before everything else."

Randolph adjusted his cuffs and buttoned his jacket. "Accepted."

"So you're not whispering to her, pretending to be her father. You're not breaking those birds of hers."

"Of course not."

Harry nodded and looked over Peter Randolph carefully. A prerequisite for being a therapist is the ability to judge character quickly. He now sized up this man and came to a decision. "I want to try something radical with Patsy and I want you to help me."

"Radical? You mean, commit her?"

"No, that'd be the worst thing for her. When patients are going through times like this you can't coddle them. You have to be tough. And force *them* to be tough."

"Meaning?"

"Don't be antagonistic, but force her to stay involved in life. She's going to want to withdraw—to be pampered. But don't spoil her. If she says she's too upset to go shopping or go out to dinner, don't let her get away with it. Insist that she does what she's supposed to do."

"You're sure that's best?"

Sure? Harry asked himself. No, he wasn't the least bit sure. But he'd made his decision. He had to push Patsy hard. He told Peter, "We don't have any choice."

But as the man left the office Harry happened to recall an expression one of his medical school professors used frequently. He

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said you have to attack disease head-on. "You have to kill or cure."

Harry hadn't thought of that expression in years. He wished he hadn't today.

The next day Patsy walked into his office without an appointment.

In Brooklyn, at the clinic, this was standard procedure and nobody thought anything of it. But in a Park Avenue shrink's office, impromptu sessions were taboo. Still, Harry could see from her face that she was very upset and he didn't make an issue of her unexpected appearance.

She collapsed on the couch and hugged herself closely as he rose and closed the door.

"Patsy, what's the matter?" he asked.

He noticed that her clothes were more disheveled than he'd ever seen. They were stained and torn. Hair bedraggled. Fingernails dirty.

"Everything was going so well," she sobbed, "then I was sitting in the den and I heard my father's ghost again. He said, 'They're almost here. You don't have much time left. . . .' And I asked, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'Look in the living room.' And I did, and there was another one of my birds! It was shattered!" She opened her purse and showed Harry the broken pieces of ceramic. "Now there's only one left! I'm going to die when it breaks. I know I am. Peter's going to break it tonight! And then he'll kill me."

"He's not going to kill you, Patsy," Harry said calmly, patiently ignoring her hysteria.

"I think I should go to the hospital for a while, Doctor."

Harry got up and sat on the couch next to her. He took her hand. "No."

"What?"

"It would be a mistake," Harry said.

"Why?" she cried.

"Because you can't hide from these issues. You have to confront them."

"I'd feel safer in a hospital. Nobody'd try to kill me in the hospital."

"Nobody's going to kill you, Patsy. You have to believe me."

"No! Peter—"

"But Peter's never tried to hurt you, has he?"

A pause. "No."

"Okay, here's what I want you to do. Listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"You know that whether Peter was pretending to say those words to you or you were imagining them, *they weren't real.* Repeat that."

"I . . ."

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"Repeat it!"

"They weren't real."

"Now say, 'There was no ghost. My father's dead.'"

"There was no ghost. My father's dead."

"Good!" Harry laughed out loud. "Again."

She repeated this mantra several times, calming each time she did. Finally, a faint smile crossed her lips.

Harry squeezed her hand.

Then she frowned. "But the bird . . ." She opened her purse and took out a dozen pieces of shattered ceramic.

"Whatever happened to the bird doesn't matter. It's only a piece of porcelain."

"But . . ." She looked down at the broken shards.

Harry leaned forward. "Listen to me, Patsy. Listen carefully." Passionately, Harry Bernstein said, "I want you to go home, take that last bird, and smash the hell out of it."

"You want me to . . ."

"Take a hammer and crush it."

She started to protest but then she smiled. "Can I do that?"

"You bet you can. Just give yourself permission to. Go home, have a nice glass of wine, find a hammer, and smash it." He reached under his desk and picked up the wastebasket. He held it out for her. "They're just pieces of china, Patsy."

After a moment she tossed the pieces of the statue into the container.

"Good, Patsy." And—thinking, *To hell with transference*—the doctor gave his patient a huge hug.

An hour later Patsy Randolph returned home and found Peter sitting in front of the television.

"You're late," Peter said. "Where've you been?"

"Out shopping. I got a bottle of wine."

"We're supposed to go to Jack and Louise's tonight. Don't tell me you forgot."

"I don't feel like it," she said. "I don't feel well. I—"

"No. We're going. You're not getting out of it." He spoke in that abrupt tone he'd been using recently.

"Well, can I at least take care of a few things first?"

"Sure. But I don't want to be late."

Patsy walked into the kitchen, opened the bottle, and poured a large glass of the expensive merlot. Just like Dr. Bernstein had told her. She sipped it. She felt good. Very good. "Where's the hammer?" she called.

"Hammer? What do you need the hammer for?"

"I have to fix something."

"I think it's in the drawer beside the refrigerator."

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She found it. Carried it into the living room.

Peter glanced at it, then back to the TV. "What do you have to fix?"

"You," she answered and brought the heavy tool down on the top of his head with all her strength.

It took another dozen blows to kill him, and when she'd finished she stood back and gazed at the remarkable patterns the blood made on the carpet and couch. Then she went into the bedroom and took her diary from the bedside table—the one Dr. Bernstein had suggested she keep. Back in the living room, Patsy sat down beside her husband's corpse and in her diary she wrote a rambling passage about how, at last, she'd gotten the ghosts to stop speaking to her. She was finally at peace. She didn't add as much as she wanted to; it was very time-consuming to write using your finger for a pen and blood for ink.

When Patsy'd finished, she picked up the hammer and smashed the Boehm ceramic owl into dust. Then she began screaming as loudly as she could, "The ghosts are dead, the ghosts are dead, the ghosts are dead!"

Long before she was hoarse the police and medics arrived. When they took her away she was wearing a straightjacket.

A week later Harry Bernstein sat in the prison hospital waiting room. He knew he was a sight—he hadn't shaved in several days and was wearing wrinkled clothes—which, in fact, he'd slept in last night. But he didn't care. He stared at the filthy floor.

"You all right?" This question came from a tall, thin man with a perfect beard. He wore a gorgeous suit and Armani-framed glasses. He was Patsy's lead defense lawyer.

"I never thought she'd do it," Harry said to him. "I *knew* there was risk. I *knew* something was wrong. But I thought I had everything under control."

The lawyer looked at him sympathetically. "I heard you've been having some trouble, too. Your patients . . ."

Harry laughed bitterly. "Are quitting in droves. Well, wouldn't you? Hell, Park Avenue shrinks are a dime a dozen. Why should they risk seeing me? I might get them killed or committed."

The jailor opened the door. "Dr. Bernstein, you can see the prisoner now."

He stood slowly, supporting himself on the door frame.

The lawyer looked him over and said, "You and I can meet in the next couple of days to decide how to handle the case. The insanity defense is tough in New York, but with you on board I can make it work. We'll keep her out of jail. . . . Say, Doctor, you going to be okay?"

Harry gave a shallow nod.

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The lawyer said kindly, "I can arrange for a little cash for you. A couple thousand—for an expert-witness fee."

"Thanks," Harry said. But he instantly forgot about the money. His mind was already on his patient.

The room was as bleak as he'd expected.

Face white, eyes shrunken, Patsy lay in bed, looking out the window. She glanced at Harry, didn't seem to recognize him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Who are you?" She frowned.

He didn't answer her question either. "You're not looking too bad, Patsy."

"I think I know you. Yes, you're . . . Wait, are you a ghost?"

"No, I'm not a ghost." Harry set his attaché case on the table. Her eyes slipped to the case as he opened it.

"I can't stay long, Patsy. I'm closing my practice. There's a lot to take care of. But I wanted to bring you a few things."

"Things?" she asked, sounding like a child. "For me? Like Christmas. Like my birthday."

"Uh-hum." Harry rummaged in the case. "Here's the first thing." He took out a photocopy. "It's an article in the *Journal of Psychoses*. I found it the night after the session when you first told me about the ghosts. You should read it."

"I can't read," she said. "I don't know how." She gave a crazy laugh. "I'm afraid of the food here. I think there are spies around. They're going to put things in the food. Disgusting things. And poison. Or broken glass." Another cackle.

Harry set the article on the bed next to her. He walked to the window. No trees here. No birds. Just gray, downtown Manhattan.

He said, glancing back at her, "It's all about ghosts. The article."

Her eyes narrowed and then fear consumed her face.

"Ghosts," she whispered. "Are there ghosts here?"

Harry laughed hard. "See, Patsy, ghosts were the first clue. After you mentioned them in that session—claiming that your husband was driving you crazy—I thought something didn't sound quite right. So I went home and started to research your case."

She gazed at him silently.

"That article's about the importance of diagnosis in mental-health cases. See, sometimes it works to somebody's advantage to *appear* to be mentally unstable—so they can avoid responsibility. Say, soldiers who don't want to fight. People faking insurance claims. People who've committed crimes." He turned back. "Or who're *about* to commit a crime."

"I'm afraid of ghosts," Patsy said, her voice rising. "I'm afraid of ghosts. I don't want any ghosts here! I'm afraid of—"

Harry continued like a lecturing professor. "And ghosts are one

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of the classic hallucinations that sane people use to try to convince other people that they're insane."

She stopped speaking.

"Fascinating article," Harry continued, nodding toward it. "See, ghosts and spirits *seem* like the products of delusional minds. But, in fact, they're complex metaphysical concepts that someone who's really insane wouldn't understand at all. No, true psychotics believe that the actual *person* is there speaking to them. They think that Napoleon or Hitler or Marilyn Monroe is really in the room with them. You wouldn't have claimed to've heard your father's *ghost*. You would actually have heard *him*."

Harry enjoyed the utterly shocked expression on his patient's face. He said, "Then, a few weeks ago, you admitted that maybe the voices were in your head. A true psychotic would never admit that. They'd swear they were completely sane." He paced slowly. "There were some other things, too. You must've read somewhere that sloppy physical appearance is a sign of mental illness. Your clothes were torn and dirty, you'd forgotten to do straps . . . but your makeup was always perfect—even on the night the police called me over to your apartment. In genuine mental-health cases, makeup is the first thing to go. Patients just smear their faces with it. Has to do with issues of masking their identity, if you're interested.

"Oh, and remember, you asked if a ghost could come to one of our sessions? That was very funny. But the psychiatric literature defines humor as ironic juxtaposition of concepts based on common experience. Of course, that's contrary to the mental processes of psychotics."

"What the hell does that mean?" Patsy spat out.

"That crazy people don't make jokes," he summarized. "That cinched it for me that you were sane as could be." Harry looked through the attaché case once more. "Item number two." He looked up, smiling. "After I read that article and decided you were faking your diagnosis—and listening to what your subconscious was telling me about your marriage—I figured you were using me for some reason having to do with your husband. So I hired a private eye."

"Jesus Christ, you did what?"

"Here's his report." He dropped the folder on the bed. "It says, basically, that your husband *was* having an affair and was forging checks on your main investment account. You knew about his mistress and the money and you'd talked to a lawyer about divorcing him. But Peter knew that you were having an affair too—with your friend Sally's husband. Peter used that to blackmail you into not divorcing him."

Patsy stared at him, frozen.

He nodded at the report. "Oh, you may as well look at it. Pre-

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tending you can't read? Doesn't fly. Reading has nothing to do with psychotic behavior; it's a developmental and IQ issue."

She opened the report, read through it, then tossed it aside disgustedly. "Son of a bitch."

Harry said, "You wanted to kill Peter and you wanted me to establish that you were insane—for your defense. You'd go into a private hospital. There'd be a mandatory rehearing in a year and, bang, you'd pass the tests and be released."

She shook her head. "But you knew my goal was to kill Peter? And you let me do it! Hell, you *encouraged* me to do it."

"And when I saw Peter I encouraged *him* to antagonize you. . . . It was time to move things along. I was getting tired of our sessions." Then Harry's face darkened with genuine regret. "I never thought you'd actually kill. I thought you'd *try*—maybe hit him a few times with the hammer. Then you'd get off on the insanity defense and he'd run for the hills—and agree to the divorce—because he didn't want to be married to a crazy woman. But I got it wrong. What can I say? Psychiatry's an inexact science."

"But why didn't you go to the police?"

"Ah, that has to do with the third thing I brought for you."

I can help you and you can help me. . . .

He lifted an envelope out of his briefcase. He handed it to her.

"What is this?"

"My bill."

She opened it. Took out the sheet of paper.

At the top was written: *For Services Rendered.* And below that: *$10 million.*

"Are you crazy?" Patsy gasped.

Harry had to laugh at her choice of words. "Peter was nice enough to tell me exactly what you were worth. I'm leaving you a million . . . which you'll probably need to pay that slick lawyer of yours. He looks expensive. Now, I'll need cash or a certified check before I testify at your trial. Otherwise I'll have to share with the court my honest diagnosis about your condition."

"You're blackmailing me!"

"I guess I am."

"Why?"

"Because with this money I can afford to do some good. And help people who really need helping." He nodded at the bill. "I'd write that check pretty soon—they have the death penalty in New York now. Oh, and by the way, I'd lose that bit about the food being poisoned. Around here, if you make a stink about meals, they'll just put you on a tube." He picked up his attaché case.

"Wait," she begged. "Don't leave! Let's talk about this!"

"Sorry." Harry nodded at a wall clock. "I see our time is up." ●

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The Daughters of Crooked River

by Edward D. Hoch

Locked rooms and impossible crimes: Edward D. Hoch is the contemporary master of the form. But Mr. Hoch most often chooses the sleepy New England village of Northmont, home of series character Sam Hawthorne, for this type of mystery—not the Wild West of Ben Snow. As always, the research is impeccable, based this time on Canada's Northwest Territories in the 1880s.

Ben Snow had traveled to Canada in the autumn of 1885, working for a time with a circus before setting out again on his wanderings. He'd boarded his new horse Oats at a stable west of Chicago and gone back to that area for the winter. But with the coming of spring he decided to return to Canada and ride west. He was still a young man in his mid twenties with a quick draw and no responsibilities. A time for settling down would come later.

Ben was riding through Saskatchewan, part of the Northwest Territories, where occasional patches of snow still lingered from winter. He was about a hundred miles east of Saskatoon when he came upon the small town of Crooked River. On another day, in different circumstances, he never would have stopped there, but he saw at once that a disturbance of some sort was in progress on the town's main (and only) street. Several young women holding signs were being attacked by a group of men. One short girl was actually thrown to the ground as Ben watched, and he wasted no time in riding to her aid.

"Keep out of this, stranger," the man who'd assaulted her warned. Ben came off his horse and was on him in a single bound, knocking the man over. One of the other men went for his gun, but Ben was faster. When they saw the speed of his draw the others froze.

"Leave these women alone," he told them. When they'd backed away he slid his revolver into its holster and helped the woman

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up. She was small and young, probably not yet twenty, with a pretty face smudged by dirt.

"Thank you," she said as the other women clustered around. All were young, some no doubt still in their teens, and now he took the time to read the signs they carried. Two read *Justice for the Metis* and *Avenge Anatole Dijon,* and others voiced similar sentiments. A lone man, his dusky face pockmarked, had been standing near them, but now he quickly retreated out of sight.

A tall, dark-haired woman, a few years older than the rest, stepped forward. "You'd better come with us, mister, until things calm down. We don't want a gunfight over this."

Glancing toward the men, who were grumbling together about thirty feet away, Ben decided that might be a good idea. Leading Oats behind him, he set off with the women. "I'm Ben Snow," he said, "riding west to look for work."

The tall woman introduced herself. "Dolores MacKenzie. You happened along at just the right time. Cindy here was getting the worst of that argument."

The younger woman was still carrying her sign and Ben asked her who the Metis were. "Are they Indians?"

"Not exactly," Cindy replied. "They're Canadians of French and Indian blood. The government wants to take their land."

Dolores reached over to wipe the smudge of dirt from her face. "Cindy's my kid sister," she explained. "Since the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed we've had lots of eastern farmers and immigrants coming out here. The Metis fear the national government plans to appropriate their land for the new arrivals. Last year they led a brief uprising in the territory and the federal militia was called in to crush it. Some of us, the younger women, the daughters of Crooked River, if you will, feel they're being treated unfairly. We have friends among the Metis men and we want to see them keep their land."

"They're squatters?" Ben asked.

Cindy MacKenzie bristled at once. "I hate that word. The Metis have as much right to the land as those people coming west on the trains. More right, in fact! They were here first."

The men seemed to be gathering their courage for another attack, and Ben suggested it might be wise if he stayed with the women. But Dolores told him, "Cindy and I live in the last house at the end of the street. We'll be safe there. The others can come home with us until the men decide they'd rather drink than rough up young women."

"What were you hoping to accomplish with your protest?"

A third young woman spoke up. She had dark hair and striking green eyes. "A man was murdered here last Wednesday, a Metis named Anatole Dijon. The Mounties haven't done a thing about it."

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Ben was unfamiliar with the term. "Mounties?"

"The Northwest Mounted Police. The only law we have in these parts. They wear red coats and ride horses. You'll know them when you see them."

They'd reached the end of the street and the six women turned to enter a white clapboard house with a picket fence around it. "We'll be all right now," Dolores assured him. "Thank you for your help."

"About this man Dijon—"

"Edith shouldn't have mentioned him."

"Why not?" he asked, but they'd hurried inside and shut the door.

Ben mounted his horse and started riding back down the street the way he'd come. The men were still down there and he couldn't believe they would leave the women alone once he rode out of town. But in one respect the west in the Canadian territories was little different from the American West. Crooked River had its saloon, this one called the Oasis, with a poorly painted camel and a palm tree on the window. The men seemed to be drifting that way as he approached. He tied Oats to the hitching post and went inside himself, followed by the man he'd knocked down earlier.

"What's your business here?" the man asked him. He was tall and husky, but without the weathered face of a cowhand. Ben guessed him to be a fairly recent arrival.

"Just passing through. The ladies looked as if they needed some help."

"Let me tell you about that," the man said, extending a pouch of chewing tobacco. It was a gesture of friendship but Ben waved it aside. "My name's Otis Bates and I want what's mine."

"Ben Snow," he said by way of introduction, signaling the bartender for a beer.

"I came out here on the first Canadian Pacific train last year. Used to have a farm near Toronto and my wife and I figured we could get more for our money in the new territories. The government promised us fine wheat-growing land, but when we got here we found squatters—Indians and Metis. The Metis are the worst. Soon after we arrived they started an armed rebellion. This man Dijon was their leader in this area."

"He's the one who was killed last week?"

"That's right. The women are blaming us, but we didn't have anything to do with it. Anatole Dijon was killed in a freak accident. His dog put its paw on the trigger of his rifle and fired it."

Ben admitted he'd never heard of such a thing. "That's a hard story for anyone to swallow. Where was he when it happened?"

"Alone in his cabin with the door bolted. The rifle was on a chair across the room. It couldn't have been suicide." Bates took a drink of his own beer.

"Why are the women so outraged by it?"

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Otis Bates made a noise somewhere between a snort and a snicker. "Because he was foolin' around with one of them. She was his girlfriend."

"Which one?"

"I don't know all their names. The one with the green eyes, she's the one."

Ben remembered the young woman they'd called Edith. She was the only one with green eyes. He decided to remain in Crooked River a day or two. A dog that could kill someone with a rifle was certainly worth meeting.

Ben camped out overnight about a mile from the town, building a fire for warmth and to keep away wolves. In the morning he rode back into Crooked River without seeing any signs of the water that gave the place its name. After eating breakfast at the nearly deserted Oasis, he decided to speak further with the young woman named Edith. Without knowing her last name or where she lived, he was forced to start out at the only place he did know, the home of the MacKenzie sisters at the end of the street.

He passed through the gate in the picket fence and was almost to the front door when it suddenly opened. The younger of the sisters, Cindy MacKenzie, hurried out to intercept him. "Our father's at home," she warned. "You can't come in!"

"Can you tell me where Edith—" he began, but then cut himself off. A tall, striking man who could only have been her father had appeared in the doorway. He wore a red uniform coat with a lanyard around his neck that ran to the butt of a holstered revolver. It was little wonder the MacKenzie daughters knew they'd be safe at home. Their father was a Mountie.

"Can I help you, sir?" the man in the doorway asked. "I'm Sergeant Dudley MacKenzie of the Northwest Mounted Police."

"Could I see you for a few minutes?" Ben improvised. He could hardly admit he'd come of get information from one of the man's daughters.

"Certainly. Come right this way."

Ben entered the modest home and followed him into a small room off the kitchen that had been converted into an office. There was a bookcase in one corner and a gun rack on the wall opposite MacKenzie's desk. "I didn't realize the Mounted Police officers were stationed this far south," he said, pretending to know more than he did about them.

Sergeant MacKenzie smiled and sat down behind the desk. "Saskatchewan is still part of the Northwest Territories. Actually, we're expanding in this area, building new police posts in many of the larger towns. The railroad has made a big difference. But what can I do for you, Mr.—?"

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"It's Snow, Ben Snow. I was passing through yesterday and I heard about the dog that shot a man here last week. I've had a bit of experience with such things and thought I might be of some help."

"Experience with what—shootings or animals?"

"Well, both. Last year I worked for the circus in Ontario."

The Mountie smiled. "There's no doubt the dog accidentally discharged the weapon. Got him right through the heart. I've marked the case closed."

"You can do that, by yourself?"

"Crooked River doesn't even have a doctor, Mr. Snow, much less a sheriff or a coroner. I'm the only law there is."

"Some feel the Metis are being mistreated by the government."

Dudley MacKenzie sighed. "You have to view their situation over the long run. A generation or more ago their fathers, mainly French-Canadian hunters and fur trappers, came to settle in this area. Indian women bore their children, and it is these children, the Metis, who are claiming the land as their own. Now, with the railroad opening Saskatchewan to eastern wheat farmers and immigrants, they want their share of the land too. The Metis, for the most part, are squatters."

"The women of Crooked River seem to feel differently, especially about the death of Anatole Dijon. They think he was murdered, and that a proper investigation has not been conducted."

"It's possible, Mr. Snow, that one or more of these women had an improper relationship with Dijon. He had a bad reputation hereabouts."

Ben wondered if he knew that both his daughters had joined in the protest. "I understand he was close to a young woman named Edith. Do you know where I could reach her?"

"I don't think anything would be gained by your snooping around. I'm having enough trouble as it is."

"If this Edith was involved with Dijon, I might be able to help her cope with her loss."

The sergeant was losing patience. "Are you a minister too, in addition to being a detective and an animal handler?"

"Sorry," Ben told him. "I don't mean to intrude. Could I at least see this remarkable dog?"

"Do you think he'll talk to you?"

"No. I just want to see him. Is he locked up?"

Sergeant MacKenzie seemed to give up the struggle. "Edith Ritter took the dog. Keep riding down this road. The Ritter farm is about a mile out of town, the first one on the left."

He saw her at once, the green-eyed young woman from the previous day. She wore blue jeans and a plaid shirt, and was playing near the farmhouse with a medium-sized black dog whose tail

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seemed to curl up oddly at the end. Ben dismounted and walked over to join them.

It took her just an instant to recognize him. "You're the cowboy from yesterday, the one who knocked down Otis Bates."

"That's me. You're Edith Ritter and this is—?"

"Patches." He came running at the sound of his name and she stroked his wavy black coat. "He was Anatole's dog."

"The one that shot him."

Her green eyes blazed. "That's ridiculous and everyone knows it!"

Ben knelt to play with the dog. Patches was about two feet tall at the shoulders, and he noticed a spot on the dog's side where some hair had been shaved away. There was a mark, almost like a brand, but he couldn't make it out. "I've never seen a dog quite like this. What breed is he?"

"A Briard, named after a region in France, I think. Anatole's father brought a couple out with him and bred them. This was one of the puppies. He's full-grown now, of course."

"What about this tail? I've never seen that on a dog before."

"They carry it low, but it curves up at the end. He's a wonderful dog. They're used for sheep herding and as watchdogs back in France. Anatole loved him."

"Tell me about the day he died," Ben said.

She shook her head, and for the first time he saw tears forming in her eyes. "I don't know what to tell."

"I know you two were close. Were you there that day?"

After a moment she nodded. "Earlier. I'd spent the night there. My folks thought I was at the MacKenzies' house with Cindy and Dolores."

"Had you done that before?" he asked quietly.

She nodded again. "Once or twice. I made breakfast for Anatole and played with Patches for a bit, then left to come back here. They needed me for some farm work." She gestured toward the fields. "There's a crop of winter wheat almost ready for harvesting."

Ben examined the Briard's paws. "Did Anatole's rifle have a hair trigger?"

"I—I don't know. I never fired it."

"I suppose Sergeant MacKenzie took possession of that."

"I think so, yes. I haven't been back to the cabin."

"Could we go there now?" Ben knew he had to see it.

"I'm sure it's locked up."

"Let's just look."

An older woman, obviously Edith's mother, had come out on the porch of the farmhouse. "You've got work to do," she called out to her daughter, a remark no doubt aimed at Ben's presence.

He straightened up and walked over to the porch. Close up, the woman was quite handsome, an older version of Edith herself,

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with those same sea-green eyes. "My name's Ben Snow, Mrs. Ritter. I'm sorry to bother your daughter but I'm investigating last week's shooting of Anatole Dijon."

She peered at Ben uncertainly. "Are you with the Mounties?"

"I just came from Sergeant MacKenzie's office. He gave me directions here. If I have your permission I'd like Edith to show me Dijon's cabin."

Mrs. Ritter's face was grim. "I know she went over to see him sometimes. I can only pray that nothing bad happened between them. She's at an age where she's becoming attracted to boys, but Dijon was too old for her, and the wrong sort."

"Because of his mixed blood?"

"That and other things." She gave a wave of dismissal. "So long as you're with the Mounties I guess it's all right for her to go with you. But tell her she has to be back in an hour."

Ben walked over and told Edith what her mother had said. "Shall we ride there?" he asked.

"It's only a ten-minute walk from here. Leave your horse and we'll go across the field."

Patches romped around them as they walked, sometimes running ahead, sometimes behind. "He's a great dog," Ben remarked.

"After it happened they were going to kill him, until I said I'd take him."

"You're close friends with the MacKenzie sisters, aren't you?"

"Of course. I was between them in school, but we were all in the same room so that didn't really matter. Dolores is two years older than me and Cindy is a year younger."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty." She immediately corrected herself. "I'll be twenty next month."

Ben motioned toward a sturdily built log cabin surrounded by a field of perhaps two acres. "Is that it?"

She nodded. "This is the first time I've been back since it happened."

"Is it difficult for you, having Dolores and Cindy's father investigating the case?"

"It wouldn't be if he'd really investigate. He found Patches alone with Anatole's body in the locked cabin and decided the dog must have fired the shot with its paw! Did you ever hear anything so dumb?"

They'd reached the cabin and Ben walked around it, admiring the construction. "It's sturdily built for a log house. How do we get in?" he asked, eyeing the padlock on the cabin's only door, a sturdy oak panel with the letters AD burnt into the wood. "Is there some trick with the windows?"

She hesitated only for an instant. "No, but he kept an extra key

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hidden, in case he was out drinking and lost one. Here, give me a boost."

"What?"

"I have to go on the roof to get it."

With a hand up from Ben she easily negotiated the roof and went immediately to the cabin's chimney, feeling around to grasp a slender wire that was hanging inside. She pulled it up and presently a key appeared at the end, blackened by soot.

"I'd like to have seen him negotiating that roof in the middle of the night with a few beers inside him," Ben told her, wiping the worst of the soot from the key. He opened the padlock and they pushed at the tight-fitting door. He took note that the rusty screws in the hasp and staple hadn't been tampered with. "Who found the body?"

"The man who knocked Cindy down in the street yesterday, Otis Bates. He claimed to have a deed to this place and said Anatole was a squatter. He came out last Wednesday to warn him off the land. It must have been shortly after I left that morning. No one answered his knocking but he knew someone was there because the padlock wasn't secure and the inside bolt seemed to be on. He went around to this window and saw Anatole dead in his chair."

"Did he break in?"

"No, he rode over to Sergeant MacKenzie's house and told him what he'd found. The sergeant came out here and broke a pane of glass in the window, then unlatched it and climbed inside. Bates had the glass replaced. He says the place is his now."

Ben stood in the center of the room and looked around. There was only a minimum of furniture, with a gnawed bone on the floor giving evidence of the dog's presence. Patches went quickly to it, seeking what meat remained. The padded armchair in which the young Metis had died was obvious from its bloodstains. It was positioned close to the fireplace, which had a small pile of logs next to it. "Was last Wednesday a chilly morning?"

"It seemed a little damp in the cabin. He got the fire going while I was fixing breakfast." The memory of it had brought a quiver to her voice.

"And this is the chair where the rifle was?" He walked over to the only chair by the table.

"Yes. He'd been cleaning it the night before. But I'm certain it wasn't loaded. He never kept it loaded unless there were varmints in the area."

"Where was Patches that morning when you left?"

"Anatole had let him out and he was calling him back to feed him as I started across the field."

Ben walked over to examine the door's bolt. It was a common sort, about a foot long, attached to the door. A small knob pivoted

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it so that it dropped into two metal receivers, one on the door and the other on the door's frame. He turned back to Edith. "Didn't your father or mother think it odd when you came home from the MacKenzies' this way?"

"They never noticed. If they did, I'd have said I took the long way around." Her green eyes flashed. "I wasn't here every night, you know. Not more than three or four times altogether."

"Earlier you told me it was once or twice," he reminded her.

"I guess it was four," she admitted. "I felt sorry for him. He was being cheated out of his land by the government."

Ben studied the chair where the rifle had rested. "I need to have the weapon," he said. "Unless it has a hair trigger, there's no way that Patches could have accidentally fired with his paw."

"If their father is out, maybe Cindy or Dolores could show it to you."

"He probably has it locked up." But it was a possibility worth pursuing. "Could I keep this key to the cabin."

Edith Ritter shrugged. "Anatole won't be needing it anymore."

Ben retrieved his horse and rode back to the MacKenzie house, passing the place first and then doubling back to make certain the sergeant's horse wasn't there. He tied Oats to the gatepost and went to the door. It was the tall older sister, Dolores, who answered his knock. "My father's not home," she told him.

"That's all right. It's you or your sister I wanted to see."

"Cindy's at the general store. She works there three days a week."

"Perhaps you can help me," Ben said, aware that she hadn't yet allowed him into the house. "I understand your father has the rifle that killed Dijon and I'd like to examine it."

Her eyes were hard and unyielding. "To see if there are any muddy paw prints on the trigger?"

"You've forgotten that I helped your sister out during yesterday's demonstration. I'm no enemy."

"I believed that until I saw you in with father this morning. He's convinced you of this dog business, hasn't he?"

"I think it's highly unlikely. But I need a better explanation. I need to know whether or not the victim's rifle had a hair trigger that a dog might have touched accidentally."

Dolores thought for a moment and then said, "Come this way."

Ben followed her into the house. He knew she was heading for her father's office. "He doesn't lock it?"

"Not from us. When mother was alive she always insisted on keeping the rooms unlocked. It was something about trust." She went into the office and took down one of two carbines from the gun rack. Her father had tied a little evidence tag to the trigger guard, with Dijon's name on it. "This was Anatole's gun. Father's

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keeping it until some relatives show up to claim his things. The other carbine is an old one he rarely uses."

Ben checked to make sure it was unloaded and then squeezed the trigger. It had an easy pull, unlike his own rifle outside on the saddle. "I suppose a dog could have fired this weapon," he admitted, running his fingers over the smooth wood grain of the stock. "Could I take this with me?"

"You'd better not. He'd notice it was missing right away."

"All right. I have one like it that I can use for a test."

That interested her. "Do you know how he was shot in that cabin with the door bolted?"

"There are three possibilities that I want to try out. Then I should know." He handed her back the rifle and said as he left, "You needn't tell your father that I was here."

"Don't worry. I won't."

Ben rode back to the Dijon cabin, keeping his eye out for Sergeant MacKenzie. He knew he was taking a risk leaving Oats tied outside in full view, but he had little choice. The only outbuilding was a shed holding a plow, scythe, and other farm equipment. There was no room to hide a horse. As he inserted the key into the padlock he wondered what Dijon had used to pull the plow. But the fields were unplowed for a spring crop. He'd probably borrowed or rented a horse only when he needed one.

The inside of the cabin hadn't changed since his last visit an hour earlier. Ben stood by the straight chair for a moment, pondering its position. Then he went outside and returned with his carbine, emptying the cartridges from it. As he'd suspected, any rifle on the chair would be aimed well below normal chest level. Seated in the chair himself, he had to slouch down before the barrel was pointed at his heart. The angle seemed all wrong to Ben.

Next he took a ball of string from his pocket and looped it around the trigger of the carbine. He ran it over to the door and tried to find a crack in the frame or space underneath where the string would go. But the door's fit was too tight, as he'd learned the first time he tried to open it. If he forced the door closed on the string it was held so tightly it couldn't be pulled.

Then he tried the window Sergeant MacKenzie had broken to get in. The pane of glass had been replaced, but there was always the possibility a corner piece was missing to begin with, just enough to run the string outside. But he saw at once that it was the wrong angle for yanking on the trigger. He'd eliminated the door and window. The only other possible opening was the fireplace chimney. He laid a blanket over the ashes and stuck his head in, peering up at the sky. The wire hook was in place, dangling about halfway down the chimney. He tried another experi-

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ment with the string, but from a distance it did not have the strength to pull the trigger.

His speculations were suddenly interrupted by a push at the tight-fitting door, and the man with the pockmarked face barged in. His surprise at seeing Ben on the floor robbed him of any advantage.

"Hold it," Ben said as the man started for his gun. "I saw you yesterday."

"I remember," he answered. "Who the hell are you?"

"Ben Snow's the name. What's yours?"

"Matthew Grade. Dijon was my friend. I saw the horse outside and wondered who was snooping around."

"You're one of the Metis?"

"I suppose so," Grade said, settling down. "I'm a half-breed like them, fighting for my land. Are they sending gunfighters now to drive us off?"

"I'm no gunfighter, just a cowpoke who happened along. Tell me about Dijon. All I've heard so far has come from some of the girls in town."

"Yeah, he was popular with the ladies. That Edith Ritter especially. She and the Mountie's daughter."

"Daughter? Which one?"

"The little one, Cindy."

"How do you know that?"

The dusky man, who might have been partly Indian or Mexican, simply shrugged and said, "He told me. He said he'd like to put his mark on her."

"What did that mean?"

"It was like a brand, his initials A and D. He burned or carved it into everything he owned—his horse, his saddle, his guns."

Ben remembered the initials on the door, and the mark he couldn't quite read on the dog Patches. "Did he like the older daughter, too? Dolores?"

Grade shook his head. "Not her. She'd have nothing to do with him. He liked the young ones." He thought about it and added, "I was his friend, but I suppose he wasn't someone to be admired."

Ben nodded. "The wrong person to choose as a martyr to your cause."

"You think Bates killed him? He claimed this should be his farm."

"Someone killed him. I'm sure of that."

The dark-skinned man hesitated, then said, "I should tell you the Metis are planning another demonstration this afternoon. We can't let those girls shoulder the whole thing. We're going to march on MacKenzie's house and demand the truth about Dijon's death."

"Demonstrations have a way of getting out of hand. Don't push the Mounted Police into taking action against you."

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"People like Otis Bates are the ones they should take action against."

"I'm only passing through, but it seems to me both sides could sit down together and work something out. You don't want anyone else to die."

Grade came back to the present. "What were you doing in the fireplace looking up the chimney?"

"Trying to figure out how the trigger of this rifle could be pulled from outside the cabin." He explained where the gun had been in relation to the body.

"What good would that do?" Grade asked logically. "You think the killer put a string on it, took the other end out the door or up the chimney, and then Dijon bolted the door after him and waited for the gun to go off?"

Ben saw at once the error in his careful reasoning. It wasn't the gun that was tampered with, it was the door bolt. And in that instant he knew how it had been done.

"I have to go," he told Grade. "Tell your people not to do anything foolish."

He knew his words meant nothing to Matthew Grade and the other Metis. They would hold their rally and he could only hope that bloodshed would be averted. By the time he got back to town he saw that the crowd outside the Oasis was already beginning to turn ugly. "What's all this?" he asked, riding up to Otis Bates.

"The Metis are gathering down by the Mountie's house. We're going to settle this once and for all!"

"Call it off, Bates."

The husky man shook his head. "Not this time."

Ben rode on down the street to the white clapboard house at the end. The women were there, the daughters of Crooked River, mingling with the Metis men. He dismounted and found Cindy MacKenzie in the midst of the crowd. "Call them off, Cindy," he begged her. "You and Edith can do it."

She shook her head. "They killed Anatole and they're going to pay for it!"

He looked around at the crowd, seeing Edith Ritter but not Dolores. "Where's your sister?"

"Inside with our father. Pleading with him."

Ben went up the steps and in the partly open front door. Sergeant MacKenzie was in full uniform, confronting his daughter Dolores. He turned as Ben entered. "We don't need you here, Snow. Get out before you're shot by one side or the other."

"A group of Bates's people will be here soon. If you don't get the Metis to disperse there'll be trouble."

"Whatever happens, I want you out of it, and my daughters too."

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"Cindy is out there now," Dolores tried to tell him.

He went out the door, cursing under his breath, and Ben turned to Dolores. "I want to see Dijon's rifle."

"I showed it to you this morning," she said, turning her eyes from him.

"No, you didn't. Dijon had a habit of burning or carving his initials on everything he owned, even his dog. He certainly would have put them on the stock of his carbine. Yet the one you showed me had perfectly smooth wood. Dijon's gun is the other carbine in your father's rack."

"I might have made a mistake," she acknowledged, "but I showed you the one with the tag on it."

He followed her into her father's office and took down the other weapon. He saw at once the initials AD on the stock. It took a fairly strong pull on the trigger to release the hammer. "No dog ever fired this carbine."

"My father must have tagged the wrong one."

"Or the right one. The carbine you showed me first is the one that killed Anatole Dijon."

"You mean Patches really did shoot him?"

"The dog was only an accessory, Dolores. It was you who pulled the trigger."

There were shouts from outside, and Sergeant MacKenzie's voice bellowed over all, ordering people to stand back. Ben could hear the voices, but for Dolores the two of them could have been alone in the universe. "Are you joking?" she asked.

"I wish I was. You took your father's carbine and went out there to kill Dijon last week. It must have been shortly after Edith Ritter left him that morning. When he let you in, you shot him through the heart while his dog Patches was gnawing at a bone. That was when you had the idea of making it look like an accident caused by the dog. Your father's carbine had a hair trigger, while Dijon's had a much harder pull. They were the same model, so you took Dijon's with you and left your father's weapon in the cabin. You probably didn't notice the initials on the stock until later, but you gambled you could switch the weapons again before your father saw them. You told me this is a carbine he rarely uses. In any event, the murder weapon had to be one with a hair trigger that could have been accidentally fired by Patches."

The blood had drained from her face as he spoke, but she said nothing.

"To bring it off, though, you had to leave the cabin and somehow lock it from the inside. I think you did it by propping up that door bolt with the dog's meat bone placed on the metal receiver attached to the door. Once the door was pulled shut from the out-

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side, Patches stood on his hind legs to retrieve the bone. As he pulled it free, the bolt dropped into its two receivers and the door was locked from the inside, as you knew it would be. When I saw the cabin this morning that bone was still on the floor and Patches went right to it."

"How does that implicate me?"

"Dijon's carbine with his initials on it has a hard trigger pull, and it's here in your father's rack. The murder weapon had to be the weapon you showed me, with its hair trigger and your father's tag on it. Someone in this house had to take that for the killing, leave it in the cabin, and return with Dijon's rifle for this rack. Only three people live here, you and Cindy and your father. If your father went to Dijon's cabin with a carbine, it would have been the one on his saddle, not this extra one that he rarely used. Are you telling me it was Cindy who killed Dijon and switched the carbines?"

Dolores MacKenzie seemed to straighten her shoulders at his words. "No, it was me. I did it just the way you said."

"Why?"

"I knew about his affair with Edith, but I didn't know about Cindy. Not until that morning last week when she was taking a bath and I saw the initials AD cut into her shoulder. I didn't say a word to her. I didn't need to. I took that old carbine from the rack and went out to the cabin and shot him through the heart. I'd do it again if I had to. I didn't want anyone else to be blamed so I rigged it to look as if Patches might have fired the gun."

"What—?" Ben began, but he was cut off by the sound of a shot from outside.

They both rushed to the door at once. Sergeant MacKenzie had fired into the air as Bates and the others approached the Metis with drawn guns. Ben hurried to stop Matthew Grade from drawing his pistol, and Dolores tried to reach her sister in the midst of the crowd.

Then somehow it happened, so fast that no one could prevent it. Otis Bates raised his pistol, aiming at the Mountie, and fired just as Dolores tried to block him. She went down in the dirt in front of the house as MacKenzie returned the shot with a single bullet that killed Bates where he stood.

Ben reached Dolores an instant before Cindy and her father. He turned her over and saw the blood and heard her whispered dying words. "Don't tell him," she begged.

Ben Snow never did tell him. He stayed for Dolores's funeral in the little graveyard outside of town, and he heard the young woman praised for her heroic act. It was not his place to add to a father's grief. Or a sister's either, for that matter.

The following day he rode on, away from the surviving daughters of Crooked River. ●

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The Gentleman on the Titanic

by John Lutz

The genesis of John Lutz's new tale for *EQMM* was a storyline he created for a mystery puzzle game when the movie *Titanic* was "afloat" at movie theaters. With lots of *Titanic* research already done for the puzzle project, Mr. Lutz decided to pen a short story on the subject. As the ship departs on its tragic voyage, we find a mystery brewing in the plush cabins of first class . . .

The handsome young English gentleman boarded the *Titanic* shortly before she sailed. Instead of staying up on deck to watch Queenstown and the Irish shore recede, as did most of the other passengers, he retired to his first class cabin on C-deck.

He looked to be about thirty, and everything about his dress and demeanor suggested he was of high birth. His well-tailored gray suit flattered his slim but muscular build, and at lunch he demonstrated flawless social skills. His features were lean, somewhat bony, his eyes hooded and blue, his thin lips almost always arced in a pleasant near-smile that never quite took form. Accompanying these other attributes was his modulated voice and accent of the ruling class, suggesting wealth, education, and connections. The single women in first class were keenly interested.

They weren't alone in their curiosity. "Do you know the chap?" asked retired British Army colonel Roger Brookes, watching the gentleman walk away from the table.

"He didn't give his name, I'm sure," Alma Clinkscale, one of two marginally attractive but wealthy twin sisters at the table said.

Her sister Vera, identically blond and bland except for a dark mole beneath her left eye, looked up from stirring her tea. "I'll bet you were listening closely for it."

"As if you weren't."

Vera glared across the scones at her sister, the mole lending at least some intensity to her expression.

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"Extraordinary, hey?" the colonel mumbled from beneath his gray hedge of a moustache. Though in his sixties, he had a military carriage that made his ordinary brown tweed suit seem a uniform despite the bread crumbs flecking his jacket and vest. Colonel Brookes had served the Empire long and well, and his doddering manner and etiquette lapses such as crumbs at table were willingly overlooked. His devoted and accommodating wife Maude reached over and brushed the worst of the crumbs away.

"Wick is his name," said a deep voice from across the table. It belonged to British financier Donald Braithwaite. As usual when he spoke, all other conversation ceased. Large, broad-shouldered, and imposing, with a jutting jaw and fierce dark eyes sunk deep in their sockets, he would have been a man to listen to even if he didn't own much of England. "Bloke's name is Ashton Wick."

"Affable chap, but a bit vague," the colonel remarked, reaching for what was left of a hard roll. "Fine posture. Well set up, as if he's been in one of the services."

"No, I don't think he's ever been a military man," Braithwaite said. He lifted glittering stemmed crystal and took a sip of his port wine.

"He *is* English, isn't he?" the colonel's wife asked.

"Oh, yes," Braithwaite said, "though he was educated in France. I met him a few years ago when I was in Paris on business. He's some sort of artist. A sculptor, I believe."

"An artist!" Alma Clinkscale said. "Isn't that sensual and wonderful!"

The colonel gazed at her with disapproval.

"He was rumored to have talented hands," Braithwaite said.

Vera Clinkscale sampled her tea, apparently found it to her liking, and smiled without looking up.

Woolgathering, no doubt, the colonel decided.

Later that afternoon, as Wick was taking the air on the main promenade deck, a woman's voice made him pause and turn. More than the voice, it was what the woman had said that brought him up short: "Bertie!"

He stood casually, with one knee slightly bent and a hand in a pocket, and watched her approach. Recognition flooded into him. He knew her, but she was greatly changed.

"Why, Bertie Wicker!" she said more softly, smiling as she drew near. She was wearing a high-collared cotton dress with a billowing gray skirt, cinched tightly at the waist. No jewelry glinted in the sun, and her dark hair was mussed and hanging over one of her startlingly bright violet eyes. Wick sized her up immediately: She would be twenty-one now (he had known her in the slums of London six years ago when he was a twenty-four-year-old destitute art student), she was traveling third class, and she was beautiful. Her

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smile grew even broader. "Do you remember me? I'm Lorna Palin."

"Yes, Lorna . . ."

"My, my, don't you look as if you're doing well?" Then she seemed suddenly ill at ease. "You might not know it, but I, uh, used to have a terrible crush on you."

Wick knew and had known at the time. If she hadn't been so young . . .

"I was but a girl then, Bertie. Now I'm much older."

"As I am," Wick said. She was gazing at him the way the younger Lorna had those years ago. He realized he was returning her frank and somewhat confused stare. Their attraction still held, after so much time. "You've become quite beautiful," Wick stammered.

"So have you, Bertie." She winked.

He studied her, gnawing his lower lip. Then he gripped her elbow and steered her toward the rail. She didn't seem to mind. "Lorna, I'm going to have to take you into my confidence."

"Please do, Bertie."

"It isn't Bertie anymore," he said. "It's Ashton."

She took him in with those marvelous violet eyes. "Are you putting on airs, Bertie?"

He smiled. "Not exactly." His face grew serious. "I could always trust you as a child, Lorna."

"And you can trust the woman," she told him, somehow closer to him without seeming to have moved.

"On this ship, I'm not Bertie Wicker, I'm Ashton Wick."

"Bertie, are you on the wrong side of the law? Did the art not work out?"

"I'm on the right side of the law, Lorna. Would you believe me if I told you I'm with British Intelligence?"

"If you need me to believe you, then I do believe."

"No one else is to know. To you now, as to everyone else on board, I'm Ashton Wick."

"Then that's how it will be . . . Ashton. Though I do like Bertie better."

"Lorna, please!"

"All right, Ashton," Lorna said firmly.

"And we mustn't seem to know each other while on board. We must stay apart."

"Ah, I don't like that part of it, Ber—Ashton."

"It's tremendously important, or I wouldn't ask. War with Germany is in the wind, and I have a sworn and secret duty on this vessel."

"Yes, I saw a cartoon in *Punch,* and there were Germany, France, and England, sitting all together and chatting on a powder keg with its fuse burning."

"That's what makes this so important," Ashton said urgently.

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"It's for all of Europe."

"Then I'll do as you say," she told him, "but I do have a question. What's British Intelligence?"

Shortly after leaving Lorna, Wick met, as planned, with Braithwaite in Braithwaite's first-class stateroom at the opposite end of C-deck from Wick's own. Braithwaite was waiting for him and opened the door on the first knock.

"Good afternoon, Herr Braithwaite," Wick said as the door closed behind him.

Braithwaite waved an arm toward a red velvet wing chair, and Wick sat. Braithwaite continued to stand, crossing his beefy arms. He said, "For the purposes of this operation, remember that I outrank you. But on this ship, I will be Mr. Braithwaite and you will be Ashton Wick."

"Of course. That's as headquarters instructed." Wick knew that Braithwaite was one of those English who were German sympathizers banking quite literally on war and on Germany's victory. A genuine British-born citizen, he was one of the more highly placed and valuable German agents. Wick sat calmly, waiting for his briefing. German intelligence operated on a strict need-to-know basis, and for the first time he was to learn the details of the mission.

Braithwaite uncrossed his arms and began pacing as he spoke softly and conspiratorially in his gruff voice. "One of the Englishmen traveling first class on the *Titanic* is transporting plans for a radio-controlled torpedo-guidance device to an American corporation for development and manufacture. Once we learn who has the plans, our object is to photograph them, then leave them undisturbed."

Wick understood why the plans weren't simply to be stolen. This way the Germans could develop a counter-device while the Americans and British continued wasting their time and resources on a guidance system vulnerable to interference.

"We have also learned," Braithwaite said, "that the courier is one of those seated at our table in first-class dining." He smiled. "The seating arrangements were not an accident."

Wick also smiled. Berlin was thorough.

"When we decide on those of our fellow diners most likely to be the courier, we will search their staterooms, find the plans, and take our photographs. The problem, of course, is that this must be done within a limited amount of time."

"I'm sure it will be accomplished," Wick said.

He rose from his chair, as Braithwaite had gone to the stateroom door, indicating the briefing was ended.

Wick had considered, then rejected, the idea of telling Braithwaite about Lorna Palin. He was sure that problem could be held in check. And he *wasn't* quite sure how the ruthless Braithwaite

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might react to the information.

What Braithwaite hadn't told Wick was that there was another German agent on board, traveling third class as a Swede under the name Nels Svenson. Svenson had witnessed the meeting between Wick and Lorna on the promenade deck, but as yet it hadn't aroused his suspicions.

At dinner that evening, Wick was his usual charming and casual self, but through all eleven courses he was sizing up his fellow diners. Their table was actually two square tables butted together, so that twelve were seated rather than the usual eight. Who among those present possessed plans that could determine the course of history?

The twin sisters, Alma and Vera Clinkscale, he thought could probably be ruled out. But only probably. They might not be as airheaded and flirtatious as they seemed.

Next to the Clinkscales sat sardonic American playwright Charles Minheart, author of the recent Broadway and London hit musical *Around the Maypole.* He was a definite possibility.

Also at the table were the bumbling Colonel Brookes and his wife Maude, a typical ex-military couple. The colonel liked to recount old war adventures while his wife tolerated and tried to moderate his boorish behavior.

There were also *noveau riche* American hardware tycoon Ernest Walker and his dour wife Jane, from someplace called Indiana; young British bachelor Drake Manningly; Lucy Burnwright, a fading but flamboyant American actress who spent most of the evening flirting with Wick and Manningly when she wasn't obviously trying to manipulate Minheart into giving her a role in the touring production of *Maypole;* and popular British journalist Rob Coyle, on board to write an article for the *London Times* about the great ship's maiden voyage.

There were, Wick decided, too many possibilities. He had to tackle them in order of priority.

From a port to the east, another ship had set to sea. The German submarine *SM U-7* was several days out in the Atlantic when its sternly handsome and stoical commander, Hermann Geerhauser, informed his officers and crew of the sub's mission. His briefing was characteristically terse: "We are going to a point in the Atlantic where we are to shadow an ocean liner." He did not tell them why.

First Officer Willi Rendt, a bearlike but peaceable man, asked no questions, but he pondered possible reasons for the mission. The sub wasn't armed with torpedoes and was carrying only the minimal amount of ammunition for its deck gun. That boded well.

Doubting that *U-7* was about to engage in an act that might

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precipitate war, Rendt waited patiently for further instructions from his commander.

Wick and Braithwaite's suspicions centered on Manningly, the dashing bachelor, and journalist Rob Coyle. But Braithwaite did remind Wick that Lucy Burnwright was an actress. British Intelligence might think her eminently capable of deception and might have entrusted her with the plans, appealing to her romanticism as well as patriotism.

While Braithwaite concentrated his attentions on the attractive Lucy Burnwright, Wick managed to become involved in a poker game with Coyle, Manningly, and several other men in the Gentlemen's First-Class Lounge. Deliberately losing early, he excused himself from the game and left to search the cabins of both men as well as that of Lucy Burnwright, who was being kept occupied by Braithwaite. He had told her he was toying with the idea of financing a play.

After stopping at his cabin to get the small Leica camera Braithwaite had given him, Wick stepped out into the passageway and was confronted by Lorna Palin.

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I snuck up here with the rich folks to see if you wanted to stroll on the deck."

He couldn't help catching the sweet scent of her perfume, feeling the warmth of her closeness. Couldn't help touching her cheek. "I, uh, told you that wasn't possible, Lorna."

She glanced down at the camera he was carrying. "Isn't it too dark to take pictures?"

"Yes. I'm on my way up to the Gentlemen's Lounge to show someone how this works." He knew she couldn't follow him there.

"Ah! Is it part of your work then?" she asked, grinning at the delicious adventure of it.

"Please, Lorna, don't even mention that. Only trust me. I don't want you to be in danger."

"I don't care—"

"Or to put me in danger."

She paused and stared up at him, then kissed him again, this time gently on the lips. He couldn't help it. He held her close and kissed her back.

When they separated, he whispered, "Please, Lorna!"

"I understand, love," she said. "But later . . . ?"

"Later," he promised.

She hesitantly took her hand away from his arm. Smiling, she left him.

Minding his mission, Wick hurried in the opposite direction, toward the first of the cabins whose door he was to open with the master key Braithwaite had mysteriously procured. It was all

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enough to make one have complete faith in Berlin.

But after thorough searches, Wick had found nothing suspicious in the cabins of Manningly, Coyle, or Lucy Burnwright.

"We must extend our searches," Braithwaite told him later that night. "And soon."

The next morning, as Colonel Brookes strolled on deck for his daily exercise while his wife reclined in a deck chair and read a Jacques Futrelle novel, Wick found the plans hidden in a false bottom of the colonel's suitcase.

He was waiting for the colonel when he returned to the stateroom to change from his walkers.

Brookes stood motionless while his glance shot to the still-open suitcase then back to Wick.

"Mrs. Brookes still reading?" Wick asked.

The colonel didn't blink. "You know she is, or you wouldn't be here. A Futrelle novel. Chap's on board, you know."

"The plans are gone," Wick said. "I'm putting them in a safe place."

"And where would that be?" the colonel asked. His bearing was much different now. The doddering, kindly military fossil was suddenly vital and sharp-eyed.

"My stateroom, one of the last places Braithwaite would search." Wick stood up from his chair and extended his hand. "I'm Captain Evan Wick, British Intelligence. I'm also a German double agent. They think I'm working for them."

Brooks hesitated before shaking the hand, then said crisply, "Explain."

Wick did.

The *U-7* had reached its destination 370 miles off the coast of Newfoundland.

"We will soon be engaged in a recovery operation," Captain Geerhauser told his officers. "An object in a watertight container will be jettisoned from the ocean liner we are to shadow. It will float a few feet beneath the surface and emit a radio signal, and fifteen minutes later a stream of yellow dye. The U-7 will home in on the signal, then visually on the dye, and recover the container."

He then turned command over to Willi Rendt and retired to his quarters. When it was dark, the *U-7* was to surface and lookouts were to be posted. Neither Rendt nor any of the other officers had asked what was in the container they were to recover. Geerhauser would have informed them if he'd wanted them to know.

On the fourth day at sea, Braithwaite answered a knock on his stateroom door to find the six-foot, hulking form of Nels Svenson looming in the passageway

"You'd better have good reason to be here," Braithwaite said, grab-

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bing the man's arm and pulling him inside before anyone saw him.

"I've been watching Wick, as instructed," Svenson said. "He's been secretly seeing a woman on board."

Braithwaite stared at him, then sneered. "One of those idiot twins?"

"No, a third-class passenger."

"That's absurd. He's a loyal German agent with a mission." But Braithwaite knew Wick was also a man.

"They try to look casual or stay out of sight, but they act like newlyweds. They sneak kisses and pose for pictures. They make love in dark places. And I saw them talking the day we sailed, as if they already knew each other."

Braithwaite jammed his hands in his pants pockets, paced a few steps this way and that, then stood still and looked calmly at Svenson. "She's an unacceptable security risk."

"You mean she won't reach New York?"

"I didn't say that."

"Of course you didn't," Svenson said. "And there's something else. That fellow Rob Coyle's seen them together, too. I saw him watching them."

"He's a journalist snooping for a story," Braithwaite said. "We'll make sure he doesn't get one."

Svenson kept an eye on Lorna Palin as the journey progressed. On the third day at sea, he followed her up on deck after supper, thinking she might be on her way to meet Wick. The evening was cool, Rob Coyle was safely located in the lounge playing whist, and the part of the deck where the woman walked was deserted except for an elderly British gent with a bushy moustache, stubbornly trying to get a pipe lighted.

Svenson nodded to him as he crossed to the other side of the deck, still watching Lorna. He was lucky to notice her pause, then veer toward a ladder. Her pale skirt whipped briefly in the wind like a signal flag as she climbed to the deck above. Svenson glanced around to make sure he wasn't being observed, then followed.

It took him a few minutes to locate her. She was still alone, leaning with both hands on the rail and looking out to sea. She was beautiful, all right, Svenson thought, with her chin raised high and her hair blowing. He could understand how Wick had fallen.

Quietly, he walked to a spot a few feet behind her. She hadn't noticed him.

Didn't notice him until he had one huge hand at the nape of her neck, the other gripping her skirt that he'd bunched between her legs. He was hoisting her high to hurl her over the rail. "I hope you can swim, dear," he told her, as if it were all a joke.

Then they were both yanked backward. The tall man who'd had

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her staggered to keep his balance. Wick was there to punch him in the jaw.

But the man didn't fall. Instead, he shook his head, grinned, and grabbed Wick by his collar.

That was when the elderly gentleman she'd noticed on the deck below stepped from the shadows and struck the tall man on the head with what looked like a leather sap. The man still didn't fall, but stumbled and slumped against the rail. He reached again for the paralyzed Lorna. Wick punched him again, and the elderly gentleman, still with his pipe clamped firmly in his jaw, quickly stepped forward and pushed the man over the rail.

Just like that, simple, fast, unreal. But it had happened, she knew. There had been no scream, and they were too high even to hear a splash. But the tall man had been there, and now he was gone.

Then Wick had her, holding her close, asking if she was hurt.

When he was sure she wasn't, he walked with her to her cabin. Glancing back, she noticed the elderly gentleman pick up a shoe the tall man had lost in the struggle and casually toss it out into the night.

"How will you deal with Braithwaite?" the colonel asked Wick when he'd joined him later in the Gentlemen's Lounge.

"As of now," Wick said, "he still regards me as a loyal, if love-struck, German agent, and he needs me to help him find and photograph the plans. He'll play dumb about the Swede's disappearance from the ship, and so will I."

Colonel Brookes drew thoughtfully on his pipe, then exhaled a great cloud of smoke that smelled like dry pine needles burning. "Do you know yet how he plans to transport the photographed plans to Germany once he has them?"

Wick shook his head. "The Germans never reveal any more information than is necessary."

"I dare say that's so you can't answer if a British agent asks you," the colonel told him.

"I dare say," Wick agreed.

Later that evening, Lorna surrendered to her emotions and decided to go to Wick in his stateroom. He didn't answer when she knocked, but he'd given her a key in case she needed someplace to hide. She used it to let herself in, then looked around at the unsuspected luxury.

As she stood motionless on the plush carpet, she heard another key grate in the lock, and she decided to conceal herself behind a Chinese folding screen with a dragon design and surprise Wick.

Staring through the vertical crack between the screen's panels, she drew in her breath. The man who entered wasn't Wick. It was

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the large, bullish man she'd heard the stewards refer to as Mr. Braithwaite.

Now she had a problem. She considered simply stepping out from behind the screen and telling the truth, then thought better of the idea. Braithwaite probably wouldn't stay long in another man's stateroom. Besides, what *was* he doing here?

He wasn't acting as if he were looking for something. Instead, he sat in a chair that appeared too dainty for him, crossed his legs, and peered at a pocket watch on the end of a long silver chain.

Which was when the door from the passageway opened again and Wick entered the room. Lorna remained still and silent behind the screen, peeking through the narrow space where the panels were hinged. Though Braithwaite remained seated, something in his demeanor made it clear that he was Wick's superior. "Considering your history," he said in an irritated voice, "I expected that by now you would have located the plans."

"What do you know about my history?" Wick asked.

"Oh, I know much about you. Your real name is Erik Kolb, and you're considered one of the most efficient agents in the organization. You scored high when you were in London six years ago on an industrial espionage mission, posing as a young British sculptor named Bertie Wicker. Berlin also described you as a bit of a rogue. At times you tend to digress from orders and work your own strategies."

"That last is because you can trust no one in our occupation."

"You needn't trust me, completely," Braithwaite said. "In fact, I'd be disappointed in you if you did. What you must do is obey my orders to the letter."

"As I do."

"It's a changing world, and some men have wavering loyalties."

"I am not one of them, Herr Braithwaite."

Lorna felt her shattered heart continue its plunge. Wick wasn't pretending—he actually *was* a German agent.

"There's still plenty of time before we reach New York," Wick—or was it Erik Kolb?—assured Braithwaite.

Braithwaite stood up and went to the door. "We need the plans as soon as possible, not simply before the ship docks. Tonight, in fact. It's imperative. I suggest you use your time effectively, or there will be repercussions." He went out.

Wick didn't move for a moment, then locked the door and slowly began undressing for bed. Apparently he was going to disregard Braithwaite's ultimatum.

Lorna waited for hours, trembling and silent behind the screen, before Wick's deep and even breathing assured her he was sleeping and she could creep from his stateroom and return to her bunk below deck.

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On board the *U-7,* which had been running on the surface during the night to intercept, then shadow and close on the ocean liner, Rendt and the rest of the crew were astounded to see the massive, brightly lighted form of the *Titanic* appear in the darkness.

Rendt's voice quavered with awe and alarm. "Captain—"

"Stay calm, I see it," Geerhauser interrupted. The huge ship was moving deceptively fast and he had to act quickly.

"Iceberg dead ahead," the lookout conveyed to the sub's conning tower, and peering through his binoculars, Geerhauser immediately saw the menacing pale form.

He wasn't thrown. "*Titanic* will bear hard to port to avoid the iceberg," he confidently told Rendt. "We will submerge to a shallow depth to remain out of sight and veer slightly in the same direction."

He barked his orders, and *U-7* slipped beneath the dark sea as the towering wall of *Titanic's* hull approached. The plan was for the sub to pass between the *Titanic* and the iceberg. Geerhauser smiled as he realized the iceberg would reduce the area of ocean where they'd be searching for the container to be recovered in the gigantic ship's wake.

Who was he, really? Lorna wondered as she lay in her bunk, finished with her crying. Was Wick really Erik Kolb, German agent? *Did* his loyalties waver? Might he love her enough to consider changing sides in reality?

But she knew she was trying to fool herself. Most likely he'd been using her in some way. She rolled onto her side and was sure she'd begin to sob again, but she found that her eyes burned and were dry of tears.

Beneath the Atlantic's surface, the crew of the *U-7* exchanged horrified glances. The churning sound of *Titanic's* giant screws continued drawing closer.

"Hold course," the disciplined Geerhauser ordered calmly. He knew *Titanic* would soon veer sharply left to pass the iceberg. She must.

Geerhauser and Rendt looked at each other, each man waiting for the sound of the *Titanic's* screws to begin subsiding.

But the frightening sound didn't subside. It grew to a gurgling roar.

The sub began to rock.

Rendt smelled fear.

"Dive deeper!" Geerhauser shouted, his voice breaking. Then he stared at Rendt, his eyes bright with terror and puzzlement. And resignation.

Too late, he'd realized along with Rendt and the rest of the crew

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that the tiny *U-7* would be crushed between the iceberg and *Titanic*'s hull.

Lorna felt the mattress move slightly beneath her, and a slight shudder caused a water glass on a wooden shelf to vibrate and rattle. Then everything was as it had been before. She glanced at the clock on a nearby table. 11:40. Not even midnight yet.

She settled deeper beneath her warm blanket and continued to seek the oblivion of sleep.

The crew of the *Titanic* at first thought the ship had narrowly avoided the iceberg, as indeed it had. No one could guess the presence and destruction of the *U-7*.

Then the rent along the starboard side of the hull was discovered. Water was rushing in belowdecks, filling watertight compartments one by one.

Wick sat up in bed. Something was wrong. People seemed to be rushing about in the companionway. Voices not usually heard at such a late hour were filtering into the stateroom.

He climbed out of bed, slipped into his clothes and shoes, and left to investigate.

As soon as he stepped into the passageway, he was bumped by a uniformed crewman.

"What's going on?" he asked the man. "What's happening?"

"It's . . . well . . ."

Wick could see that beneath calm, wooden features, the man was badly frightened. He clutched him by both shoulders. "Tell me," he said, looking him in the eye.

"We've struck an iceberg, sir. The ship is . . . sinking." He started to say something more but seemed to choke on the words.

"What else?" Wick demanded, tightening his grip, shaking the man.

"The ship wasn't supposed to sink. There aren't enough lifeboats." The crewman wrenched himself free of Wick's grasp and hurried away.

Trying to comprehend fully what he'd just heard, Wick noticed for the first time that the passageway floor was tilted slightly toward the bow. He had to see for himself what was happening. Tucking in his shirt, he made his way up on deck.

The night was cool but bright with starlight, and the deck was already teeming with passengers, most of them wearing life jackets. Wick knew the water was too cold to allow survival for very long.

The forward angle of the ship wasn't yet severe, and while there was excitement, there certainly wasn't panic. Even among passengers who knew the lifeboat situation, true realization hadn't yet

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set in. This, and what must follow, was simply unacceptable. There was no precedent or protocol for such a thing. They refused to believe, yet they knew. The bright, gay floating city, thought to be unsinkable, would soon be on the ocean floor for all eternity.

A hand touched Wick's shoulder and he turned. Braithwaite, appearing impatient but confident as always, was at his side.

"We're sinking," Wick said.

Braithwaite nodded. "You know the lifeboat dilemma?"

"I've been told." Wick knew something else. Braithwaite had ordered the Swede to kill Lorna because she was a security risk who endangered the mission. Now he wouldn't want her to be one of the survivors. There was a way Wick might protect her. The success of the mission might be enough to make Braithwaite forget her at least for the moment, maybe long enough. The coming war, duty to country, seemed very far away now. Love, and death, were much nearer.

"I found the plans and photographed them," Wick said, and dug into a deep pocket and produced a small and tightly wrapped roll of film.

Braithwaite accepted the film and held it tightly. "This can't be delivered in the manner anticipated. I'll see that a contact in New York receives it and gets it to Berlin."

"If you survive."

Braithwaite smiled. "That's been arranged. There's nothing more for you to do, Herr Kolb. You've performed your duty admirably, and I'll see to it that you receive proper recognition and a medal."

"Posthumously," Wick pointed out.

Braithwaite shrugged. "Perhaps, but I hope not." He turned away from Wick.

Wick immediately began searching for Lorna. She wasn't in her bunk, and none of the third-class passengers knew her whereabouts. And she hadn't gone to Wick's stateroom looking for him.

While he was in the stateroom, he spent a few minutes there, then put on his short gray wool coat and grabbed a life jacket, noticing with a pang of alarm that there were several inches of water in the passageway as he went back up on deck.

Finally he found her, near an entrance to the Verandah Cafe, just aft of the Smoking Lounge. Some of the other passengers, a few of them still in their evening clothes, were seated at the white wicker tables as if confused and awaiting service.

When Wick approached, he was shocked to see her turn her back on him.

"Lorna—"

"I don't want to see or talk to you again, Erik Kolb."

Now he understood, but he didn't know how she'd found out. And now it hardly mattered. "The ship is going to sink, Lorna."

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"When the lifeboats are picked up or reach shore—"

"There aren't enough lifeboats. Don't you understand? I want you to go to one of the boats now and—"

But she was hurrying along the sloping deck away from him, wearing slippers already soaked, her long blue robe fluttering about her ankles. When he followed, she broke into a run.

Wick ran after her, around people wearing stunned expressions, through clusters of passengers helping each other into life jackets. Sidestepping an old man trying to comfort his sobbing wife, Wick followed Lorna below deck.

He'd lost sight of her until he turned a corner of a dim passageway, the leather soles of his shoes sloshing on saturated carpet.

Braithwaite had Lorna by an arm and was trying to get his free hand around her throat.

Wick charged and knocked both of them to the floor. When Braithwaite tried to scramble to his feet, Wick slammed him across the back of the neck with the heavy canvas life jacket he was still carrying. The next time Braithwaite attempted to get up, he was met by a solid right cross to the chin and fell back unconscious.

Lorna was leaning against a wall, swaying. Wick supported her. "Whatever my name is, wherever my loyalties lie, I do love you," he told her. She didn't resist as he put his woolen coat on her and led her back up on deck and to the nearest of the lifeboats that were being hurriedly loaded.

As she was about to claim one of the last available places in the boat, she turned and kissed him on the lips, hard. "Come with me, please!"

"I can't. I'll put on my life jacket and wait to be picked up. It shouldn't be long."

She looked out at the calm black sea, then back at Wick.

"Trust me. There's nothing to worry about, Lorna."

"Promise you'll come to me when this is over."

Wick nodded, then urged her into the boat, not telling her that he and the other passengers who stayed on board were doomed.

He knew his duty now, and it wasn't what Braithwaite thought. Wick hurried back to the passageway below deck where he hoped Braithwaite still lay unconscious.

Things had changed. Water was now over a foot deep in the passageway and rising. Braithwaite was floating facedown, and *London Times* journalist Rob Coyle was standing over him, clutching the roll of film.

"There were several German agents on board when *Titanic* sailed," Coyle said with a smile. "It doesn't matter anymore to Braithwaite that with *Titanic*'s passengers abandoning ship, the planned recovery is impossible, and I'll get credit for delivering

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the photographs to our superiors in Berlin." With the hand not gripping the film, he produced a small revolver.

"I don't know about any planned recovery and I don't care," Wick said. "And what you say might work only if Berlin were at the bottom of the sea. The ship's sinking fast, and the water's too cold for anyone to survive long enough to be picked up. You and I are already as dead as Braithwaite."

"Don't forget to include Colonel Brookes among the dead," Coyle said. "I saw that he went overboard with a fractured skull less than ten minutes ago. And don't concern yourself about me. I've arranged for a guaranteed place in a lifeboat. The only reason you have a little longer to live and I don't shoot you now is that I don't want them to find a bullet hole if your body is recovered. You would have succeeded in your task for the British were it not for the woman. You *are* working for the British, are you not?"

Instead of answering, Wick charged Coyle. But the water slowed his rush, giving Coyle time to react. He sidestepped and raked the revolver across Wick's face, then shoved him into the stateroom where Braithwaite's body had drifted. After closing the door, he grabbed one of the pieces of furniture, a mahogany Chippendale chair, floating in the passageway. Quickly he used it to wedge the door closed from the outside.

From a lifeboat, Lorna watched *Titanic*'s stern rise high into the night sky. Then the great ship slid beneath the surface in majestic surrender. It left a vast blank space in the world, as if a city block had suddenly disappeared. The shrill, distant screams of passengers floating in the water reached them for a while over the calm sea, then there was silence but for the lapping of the waves against the drifting boat.

Lorna knew by now that it didn't matter if Wick was in the water in his life jacket or still on board. It wasn't until later that she found in a buttoned pocket of the coat he'd put on her an oilskin pouch containing what looked like complicated plans, and brief instructions to turn them over to American authorities as soon as she reached land.

The instructions were signed, "Love eternal, Erik."

As soon as possible after Rob Coyle reached New York with the other survivors, he went directly to his contact on the Lower East Side and had the roll of film developed.

It contained only photographs of a posing, smiling Lorna on board the *Titanic,* the sun and the moment caught forever in her hair and eyes.

She looked young in the photos, and in love, the rest of her life stretched before her like bright possibility. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

POLICE BUSINESS

by Michael Gilbert

Fearne and Bracknell, solicitors of Little Bethel, by the Tower of London, was a family firm, and like all the best families, it was a benevolent despotism.

The two senior partners, Francis Fearne and Robert Bracknell, conducted most of the routine business, but if an important question arose for decision it was dealt with on democratic lines. Fearne's daughter, Tara, Bracknell's son, Hugo, and their managing clerk, Mr. Piggin, all had an equal vote.

The matter they faced that spring morning was important.

It had been introduced by Tara, who had put forward a new client for their consideration. This was Detective Inspector Quinn.

"A detective inspector," said Bob Bracknell. "I don't think we've ever acted for a policeman before."

Tara said, "Why do you speak of policemen as though they were a lower form of animal life?"

"You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. There was a distinct curl to your lips when you said, 'detective inspector.'"

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"Stop quarrelling," said Fearne. "What Bob meant was that it's fatally easy for a firm of solicitors to acquire a reputation for being pro- or anti-police. Both reputations can be equally harmful and equally difficult to throw off."

He was examining a plan which showed the new arrangement of police authorities. Being, postally, E.1., they had fallen into the southern half of what had recently been defined as No. 2 Area East.

This was served by three sub-stations—Cable Street, Leman Street, and the Isle of Dogs. The best known and nearest to them was Cable Street, which was within sight of their upper-storey windows.

Fifty-two years after his debut in the mystery field, Michael Gilbert remains one of the genre's leading lights. *EQMM* is honored to publish the series of stories to which "Police Business" belongs, the more so because the featured characters—Fearne, Bracknell, et al.—have appeared in no other publication. The series gives an interesting glimpse of the British legal system: Mr. Gilbert was a London solicitor during much of his career as a writer. ₱

This was the kingdom of Chief Inspector Mayburgh, who had once been described by Mr. Piggin as an old-fashioned rhinoceros who tried to arrive at the truth by butting it head first. He regarded solicitors as obstructive nuisances and was particularly suspicious of Fearne and Bracknell, who, it seemed to him, interfered in matters which ought to be left to the police.

Leman Street, on the other hand, had proved helpful in many ways. It had originally been occupied by the Water Guard, who controlled the barge and lighter traffic on the reaches between Surrey docks and Lavender Pond. The Metropolitan Police had taken it over as a contact point with the River Police. When it had seemed that the current economy drive might result in its closure, it had been saved by that great thief-taker, Inspector Wensley.

"Close Leman Street?" he said. "A mad idea. It controls all the road traffic coming south into the docks and east to the Essex coast. It's the cork in the bottle. Take it out and the people who'll bless you are the folk who use the ships in those parts to carry off stolen goods—and wanted men—to the Continent."

Wensley was already a man of mark and his words had been listened to.

So Leman Street had not been closed. Rather, it had been enlarged, and its present incumbent, Chief Inspector Whyman, had been given peremptory orders by Area to seal the cracks through which a stream of illicit merchandise seemed to leak out to Belgium and Holland. He had scored a number of successes,

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though they had, on the whole, been against the smaller characters, the carriers. The man who was organising the traffic seemed to stay tantalisingly out of his reach.

It was Whyman's second-in-command, Detective Inspector Quinn, who now sought the help of Fearne and Bracknell.

Tara said, "It was Frank Quinn's wife, Melissa, who came to see me. She's been worried, for some time, about Frank. It's some special job he's been on. She couldn't tell me much about it, because he hasn't told her anything. Which is unusual. Before this he'd always been prepared to discuss his work with her. Recently he's been keeping his mouth tight shut. And it took a lot of persuading before he'd agree to consult us."

Fearne looked round the table. He was not happy. He loathed the thought of dissension.

Before he could speak Mr. Piggin had cleared his throat in a way which meant that he had something important to contribute to the discussion.

"My knowledge of the law," he opened with customary solemnity, "is far from profound—"

"A good deal profounder than mine," murmured Hugo.

"But it is true that I do, perhaps, keep my ear closer to the ground than any of you. And if I might summarize my feelings about Inspector Quinn, I'd say that he needs help and is worth helping."

Tara looked at him gratefully.

"I think we should accept that view of the matter," said Bob. "I've never known Mr. Piggin wrong in his evaluation of a person or a situation."

"Very well," said Fearne, glad that the matter had been taken out of his hands. "If that's unanimous—"

Four heads were nodded.

"Then I'll see him tomorrow afternoon. I was going to suggest that he might speak more freely if I saw him alone, but I feel that it would be sensible to ask Mr. Piggin to sit in with me."

Three nods.

Fearne looked at his diary and said, "Four o'clock, then." And to Tara, "Don't give him any promises. Just say we'll listen to what he has to tell us and will see if we can help him."

At first sight, Detective Inspector Quinn looked quite unlike the normal burly and self-confident policeman. He was tall and thin and, at the start, spoke hesitantly. However, when Fearne looked at him more closely he could see that he was not physically weak. Rather wiry and indestructible, like a wing forward who could go down on the ball and emerge unharmed from a pile of struggling bodies.

"Let me begin at the beginning," he said.

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"Please do," said Fearne. "Most of my clients start halfway through their story."

"Very well, then. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that a successful jewel thief is lucky if he can realise a tenth of the value of what he's stolen. The stuff is well known to the police and is on every pawnbroker's list. It will have to be broken up and disguised before he can hope to dispose of it. And that won't increase its value. But if he can export it to Belgium or Holland, and happens to be in touch with one of the big buyers, then he'll get a fair price."

"And it's your idea that the men who steal the jewellery and the smugglers who carry it abroad are now working together?"

"Under common management, you might say. And I know who the head manager is."

"Know? And can prove it?"

"Yes. It wasn't an easy job. But I think I could put my hand on his collar now."

He laid his right hand on the desk. It was a working man's hand. Rough and well muscled.

"I only began to get results when I realised that I'd been approaching the matter from the wrong end. As I sat in my office at Leman Street and watched the stream of private cars and vans heading east up the Whitechapel Road, I used to think about the dozens—maybe hundreds—of men who would help the thieves—"

"Are we universally dishonest?"

"Not universally, perhaps. But I'd guess that half the farmers in Essex and most of the fishermen on the eastern seaboard are on the side of the smugglers, as they have been for centuries."

"Difficult," agreed Fearne. "So—?"

"That was when I realised that I had to start at the other end. My holiday trips to Zeebrugge formed a useful cover for visits to Ghent. I managed to get in touch with one of the leading diamond merchants. He had suffered a good deal in his legitimate trade from this illicit competition, and he was only too willing to help me put a stop to it. So he gave me such names as he knew of the operators at the English end. The skippers of boats who used the smaller Essex ports at Walton-on-the-Naze and Clacton, and private docks and slipways in the mouth of the Colne river. Once I had these names I was able to work back to the man they were controlled by. A real professional at the top of an amateur network. A man called Samuels. Roper Samuels."

Quinn had lost his initial hesitancy and his words were now starting to flow rapidly. Almost too rapidly for the articled clerk, who was taking it down in shorthand.

"Hold your horses for a moment," said Fearne, "and tell me this. To what extent were your superior officers—Chief Inspector Why-

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man at your station and Superintendent Oliphant at Area—in the picture?"

"If you want the truth, I knew that I was onto something good and I didn't want to share the credit. When I had gathered everything up it would, of course, have gone up to Area. That would be the level at which action would be initiated."

"But until you had it all neatly tied up and packaged you preferred to keep it to yourself. Right?"

"Yes."

"But why? Your superiors would certainly have approved of what you were doing and could have helped you in a number of ways. Why do you prefer to conduct it as a private crusade?"

This produced a long pause.

Then Quinn said, with evident reluctance, "I was afraid that if I let too many people in on my plans, they'd be leaked back to Samuels, who would take steps to wriggle out of the net. We knew there was a leak, somewhere. What I'd failed to realise was that Samuels already knew what I was up to and had concluded that attack was the best form of defence. I realised this on the day I got back from Zeebrugge, when I was told to report to Superintendent Oliphant. He didn't waste any time over attempts to sugar the pill. Simply told me that I was to be suspended pending the hearing by the court of the charges against me."

"Slowly," said Fearne. "Take it slowly. What were the charges and who was preferring them?"

"The matter had been handed over to A. 10. They had advised that, on the evidence, I should be charged with accepting money corruptly in order to pervert the course of justice."

"What evidence?"

"On the evidence of my own bank account and a statement made by a small-time crook called Stevens."

"So. Then let's deal with the bank first, shall we?"

"My current account is with the National Provincial Bank, at their Limehouse branch. I had a standing arrangement that they were authorised to answer questions about this account, provided they came from the Receiver."

"Good," said Fearne. "And sensible."

"Well, I knew that if they wanted to look into my account they could always get an order from the court. I was simply saving them trouble."

"And when they looked, what did they find?"

For the first time Quinn showed some evidence of the bitterness behind his admirable self-control. He said, "They found that on the day I departed on holiday for Zeebrugge the sum of one thousand pounds had been paid into my account, in cash."

"Who by?"

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"According to A.10., by this man Stevens. And it's true that I'd been getting a certain amount of help from him. He'd been involved in that Hatton Garden jewel heist—the one where the private detective who was guarding the Dutch jewel merchant got badly knocked about. Stevens had taken no part in the actual robbery. He was driving one of the getaway cars. In a typical piece of carelessness he'd left an identifiable print—a single fingerprint—on the car when it was abandoned. He was now, apparently, saying that he'd pay me a thousand pounds if I'd fix things so that he was left out of the matter. Or if that wasn't possible, that his part in it was played right down."

"Was that true?"

"Absolutely untrue. He'd made no approach to me of any sort. Even if he had, there was nothing I could do to help him. The matter was being handled by the Central Robbery Squad. I only came into it because the getaway car had been abandoned in my manor and was under my care at that time."

"So why did he make this statement?"

"You've got to realise that he's a poor creature, without backbone or guts. His only accomplishment is that he can drive a car. Apart from that, he's a worm."

"And does what Samuels tells him."

"Exactly. When the payment to me of one thousand pounds came out—which it did with surprising speed—he was ordered, by Samuels, to make a clean breast of the whole matter. The worst that could happen to him was a minor penalty for his part in the heist, and he was booked for that already. It would be mitigated by the fact that he'd helped the police in the past and was prepared to come clean with this statement now. His story was to be that he'd had a successful day at the races and thought he could use the money to buy, through me, police assistance and forgetfulness."

"Yes," said Fearne. "I see. And how far have A.10. got with the charge?"

"It comes up before the Stepney Bench on Monday."

"Doesn't give us much time. We may have to ask for an adjournment. Meanwhile, I suggest that you stay at home and keep quiet."

When Quinn had departed, not greatly encouraged, Fearne turned to Mr. Piggin.

"You told me that Quinn needed help and was worth helping. The first proposition is true. He surely does need help. It's the second one I'm doubtful about."

"You realise," said Mr. Piggin, "that if Quinn is found guilty, the evidence he has so carefully accumulated will be tainted. His work will be discredited and Samuels will, very likely, go free. Which will be a gross miscarriage of justice."

"Provided that Quinn is telling us the truth."

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"I believe that he is. If it comes to a straight choice between him and Stevens—about whom the general view is that he is a poor-spirited sneak and a liar, who jumps in whatever direction Samuels tells him—then I know which of the two I should go for."

Fearne thought about it. He appreciated the force of what Mr. Piggin had said, but was still unhappy about it.

He said, "The first thing to do will be to brief counsel. A junior for the police court. A leader for the higher court, if it goes that far. He'll need money. I suppose he could get legal aid."

"It did occur to me to wonder whether he needed it. The opposition has paid him one thousand pounds in an effort to discredit him. Why should he not use it for his defence?"

"Something in that," said Fearne. He sounded happier. He always liked to have his costs covered.

Having taken on the job, Fearne decided to aim for the top.

One of the best-known and most effective members of the criminal bar at that period was Bernard Ericsson. His teddy-bear figure, cautious delivery, and warm smile had combined to make him—so his rivals maintained—undeservedly successful.

"The judges all love him," they complained. "They let him get away with things that anyone else would be hauled over the coals for."

He listened, without interruption, making only an occasional note, to what Fearne had to tell him. Then he said, "Yes. I see. Having this creature Stevens under his thumb—he'd nothing to lose. He was going down for his part in the heist anyway—Samuels says to him, 'Here's a thousand pounds in notes. Pay it into the inspector's account. How? Get a paying-in slip at the counter. Do it quite openly. Suppose the bank clerk does identify you. What does it matter? It's all part of your story, isn't it? You've had a bit of luck on the races and decide to use the money to buy Quinn. A little later you experience a change of heart and decide to come clean.'"

He thought about it a bit more, then added, "Incidentally, I expect you spotted why he paid the money in on the day Quinn departed on holiday. No? The reason surely is that when he got back he'd find a number of bills that needed paying. And he'd write out cheques for the more pressing of them without bothering to see how his account stood. Actually, I see it was quite healthy. Over eight hundred pounds before the unwanted thousand arrived. Yes. A very carefully worked out scheme. Simple, but dangerous because of its simplicity. There's only one thing to do."

A pigeon that had volplaned down onto the window sill stood with its head on one side, as though it, too, waited for the oracle to speak.

"When you're up against a manufactured case, you have to look for a crack. Maybe quite a small crack. Then you take a wedge and hammer it in. And go on hammering. And in the end the most

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watertight case will spring a leak. Here's where I'm going to need some help. Isn't one of your staff a man called Piggin?"

"Effectively, he's almost the whole of our staff."

"A useful man, I'm told. Send him along. I'd like a word with him as soon as possible. There's a lot of work to do."

The preliminary hearing before the magistrate caused little excitement. There had been so many cases in the past year of alleged dishonesty by members of the C.I.D. that this one caused no more than a routine wrinkling of the lips.

"Another bent copper?"

Junior counsel, instructed by the Director of Public Prosecutions, presented the case against Detective Inspector Quinn fairly and without rancour. He made no attempt to sidestep the fact that the principal witness for the prosecution was himself charged with participating in a serious jewel theft, if only in a subordinate capacity. He did not try to justify what Stevens had done. The way he put it was that he had got into a hole and was anxious to climb out of it. So he had paid, out of his own resources, the sum of £1000 into the defendant's bank account and the defendant had, in fact, drawn against it to pay some of his own debts.

For the Defence, an equally white-wigged counsel seemed anxious only to get the facts on record.

He said, "Is it correct that you had won a considerable sum of money—in round figures, one thousand pounds—at the mid-week race meeting at Frimpton Park? Please address your replies to the Bench."

"That's right, Your Honour."

"And that having this unexpected sum available, you decided to use it to purchase the support of this police officer?"

"That's right."

"And did the suggestion come from the accused or from you?"

Faced with this direct question, the witness hesitated for a moment and then said, "It was sort of mutual."

"Explain that."

"Well, he said that we might have a little talk, about matters that concerned us both, and that the back room at the Queen's Head would be a convenient place for us to meet."

"And it was at this meeting that you offered him a thousand pounds?"

"That's right."

"And what did you expect him to do in return for the money?"

"I looked to him to play down anything I'd done."

"Present it in a favourable light, you mean?"

"That's the long and short of it."

The witness seemed gratified at having his evidence neatly

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summarised for him by counsel for the defence, who asked a few more harmless questions before resuming his seat.

The senior of the three magistrates, after collecting nods from the other two, announced that they found that there was a case to answer and that the matter would be remitted to the Central Criminal Court.

Hugo Bracknell said to his father, "I don't know what we were paying counsel for. He didn't attack the case for the prosecution. Simply underlined it."

"He was doing what he was told to do," said Bob.

"Allow me to clarify a few points," said Ericsson.

Stevens, having survived the preliminary hearing without a scratch, was not unduly overawed by the solemnity of the Old Bailey. He said, with a smile, "Ask anything you like."

Ericsson was studying the thick sheaf of papers that formed part of his brief. He said, after a long pause, "When you attended this race meeting—at Frimpton Park, wasn't it—?"

Stevens nodded.

"Did you operate on the rails, or did you actually go into the meeting?"

"I went in."

"Then you placed your bets in person?"

"Of course."

"In the Cheap Ring, or in the Tattershall Ring?"

"Not the Tattershall Ring. That's for the nobs."

"Then it was the Cheap Ring."

"That's right."

Having got this answer, Counsel dived back into his notes.

Hugo, who was in court with orders from his father to make a record of all that occurred, found, suddenly and inexplicably, that the atmosphere had changed. Ericsson's voice was still quiet and friendly, but the change was there.

"Let us go a little further. Can we have the name of the bookmaker with whom you placed this fortunate bet?"

"I'm not sure. There were so many of them."

"Then let me help you. I have here a list of all ten of them."

One copy was handed to the witness, another to the judge. Whilst they were being examined Counsel said, "Your Lordship will appreciate that it has not been difficult to compile a list of all the bookmakers who were present. They could only operate if they held permits from the Bookmakers Protection Association. It is from them that this list has been obtained. Should a further check be necessary, it can be obtained from the local court, since a bookmaker has also to hold a three-year permit from a magistrate."

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The judge had been examining the list with interest. He said, "Most of the people in it appear to have two names."

"That is so, my lord. In the column on the left you will see their real names. In the next column the names under which they operate on the course."

"So Honest Mike is, in fact, Mr. Michaelson."

"That is correct. And the third column contains the names of their clerks. They accompany their principals to the scene of action and, once there, do most of the real work."

"Just like my clerk," said the judge. "Very interesting. Has the witness managed to identify the bookmaker with whom he placed his bet?"

Stevens, who had been studying the list in a bemused way, said, "I can't be quite certain. But I think it was one of those two. 'The Old Firm,' or 'Masterman Ready.'"

"If it had been 'Masterman Ready' you would have had no difficulty in recognising her. She is one of the only women bookmakers. She inherited the business from her father and runs it with two assistants. Both women."

"Then it must have been 'The Old Firm.' Yes. Come to think of it, I *do* remember that name. It was painted on a board, propped up beside the desk."

"And this was the man who took your bet? Or was it his clerk, Mr. Riddle?"

"It could have been either of them."

"And the horse you were backing?"

"Palladian Hero."

"An outsider?"

"A twenty-five-to-one outsider."

"And what led you to select this particular horse?"

"That's always a difficult thing to say."

From time to time, as he answered, the witness had allowed his gaze to leave the courtroom and stray up towards the public gallery, focussing on a stout and comfortable-looking character seated in the middle of the front row.

"Then are we to understand that you chose this horse at random?"

The witness appeared to be gaining assurance from the stout man, who smiled at him encouragingly.

"Not entirely at random," he said. "I had got into conversation with a man on the carriage on the way to Frimpton. He advised me that Palladian Hero was a promising outsider."

"And you felt his advice to be so reliable that you were prepared to venture a bet of—let me see—it must have been forty pounds on this particular animal."

"Yes. I did."

"In cash?"

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"Of course." The witness seemed amused by Counsel's ignorance of the fact that bookmakers dealt in cash.

The judge, having concluded his study of the list of names, turned to Counsel and said, "Without wishing to shorten your interesting excursion into racecourse bookmaking, I would like to know where, exactly, it is leading us."

"Certainly, my Lord." Counsel was suddenly speaking in a voice from which all vestige of good humour had departed. "I may have to ask for a short adjournment because I propose, if Your Lordship agrees, to bring before you all ten of these bookmakers, *and* their clerks. If they repeat, in court, the information that they have already given to my instructing solicitors, you will learn that none of them has any recollection of this witness. And, moreover, that a study of the records kept by their clerks will show that the only bets placed on Palladian Hero at that meeting were two of five pounds for a win and one of ten pounds for a place."

Everyone had been concentrating on the figure of the witness, but at this point a disturbance in the public gallery drew their eyes upwards. The stout character was leaving his seat. Had he done so alone he might have squeezed past his neighbours without attracting much attention, but the men on either side of him were moving with him. Their departure seemed to knock any remaining confidence out of the witness, who was grasping the rail in front of him like a nonswimmer facing a rising tide.

The judge said, "In view of the observations made by counsel, I must ask you to repeat now, as part of your evidence, on oath, that you did, in fact, place a bet of forty pounds on the horse Palladian Hero, with a bookmaker at Frimpton Park whom you cannot now positively identify, and were paid by him the sum of one thousand pounds."

The witness's mouth opened and shut, but no sound came out of it. The stout man, having reached the exit door of the gallery, had paused. He, too, seemed to be waiting for the answer.

Finally, in a voice which was a mixture of bravado and desperation, Stevens croaked out, "Yes, I did."

The judge made a careful note, turned to counsel for the prosecution, and said, "You have heard the further evidence which the defence intends to bring. If I adjourn the hearing for seven days, I trust that this will give you sufficient time to consider it."

"Yes, my lord," said Counsel, impassively.

"Very well. Adjourned until this day week."

"He's between the devil and the deep sea," said Fearne. He was in conference with his partners, with Mr. Piggin in attendance.

"He doesn't dare to retract his evidence and tell the truth—which is becoming clear to everyone—that he didn't win this

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money at the races, but that it was given to him by Samuels, to be used to blacken Quinn and discredit his discoveries. But if he *did* say anything like that, he knew what would happen to him. I imagine you saw Samuels in the gallery?"

"And the two goons with him," said Hugo.

"So much for the devil," said Bob. "The deep sea is the charge of perjury which he faces every time he repeats, on oath, that he won the money on this horse, at that race meeting."

"And since," said Tara, with evident pleasure, "we can prove that he can't have won the money in the way he says he did, how's he going to avoid an open-and-shut charge?"

"If I might make a suggestion," said Mr. Piggin.

The partners looked at him hopefully. Mr. Piggin's suggestions, although they did not always run on strictly legal lines, were always helpful.

"For what I have in mind," he said, "we shall need the support of the police. For they are more anxious even than we are to put Samuels behind bars. I've been having a word with Whyman, who is rather more friendly to us than Mayburgh. He has already made some progress in tackling the minor members of the Samuels theft-and-export organization. What he would now give his belt and buttons to be able to do is to land Samuels."

"So what precisely would you suggest to him?"

"That if he could offer Stevens effective police protection and support he might be induced to change sides. To admit that the money came from Samuels and was to be used to discredit our client. Such an admission could do him nothing but good. He can see the sharks circling round and would give a lot to get back onto dry land."

"Very well," said Fearne. "It's worth trying. But you'll have to take great care that the opposition don't get to know what you're planning."

"I can assure you," said Mr. Piggin, "that I shall take the greatest possible care."

And so he did.

But he was not careful enough.

Three days later Stevens was found, facedown in the mud, by two boys who were out in their cockleshell boat fishing, at the point where the river Crouch runs out to sea under Foulness Point.

Mr. Piggin, who was never sentimental about criminals, said, "He lived a muddy life and has ended facedown in the mud."

"An excellent result," said Fearne. "Deprived of their only witness, A.10. have been forced to abandon the prosecution."

The partnership had met in a mood of self-congratulation.

Tara said, "Melissa is over the moon about it. She thinks that

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Fearne and Bracknell are the best solicitors in England and she's been going around saying so. She's a leading light in the Women's Institute and I guess we'll be getting a lot of new clients."

"Women?" said Fearne doubtfully.

"Come off it," said Hugo. "You started by disliking the idea of having policemen as clients. Are you now extending your veto to women?"

Before the argument could develop, Mr. Piggin intervened.

He said, "There has been a further unexpected result that you may not yet have heard about. In the past, as you know, Samuels has always managed to keep clear of any personal involvement. He'd got plenty of time to make suitable arrangements for the theft of the jewels and their transport abroad to be carried out by third parties. The proceeds could be paid into a Dutch bank account and transferred to Samuels through two or three intermediaries. Now, suddenly, the situation had changed. He was forced to move quickly, and personally, to shut Stevens's mouth before he could give him away. And moving quickly and trying to handle the matter himself led to carelessness. I understand that Whyman has got two good witnesses already. One who saw Stevens being driven off from his house. And another, a fisherman, who saw his body being loaded aboard a dinghy for disposal. He feels confident enough to bring a charge of murder against Samuels."

"That's excellent," said Fearne. "Why are you looking so worried, Bob?"

"I'm not worried," said Bob. "Just puzzled. When the case started, I remember you saying that it was equally unsatisfactory for a firm of solicitors to gain a reputation for being pro- or anti-police. Which reputation have we come out of the case with?"

Fearne said, "If you consider the matter carefully, I think you'll find that we have managed to achieve an admirable balance." ●

LEMONADE LEGACY

by Pat D'Amico

Aunt Dora was a dear old maid
Who served her suitors lemonade.
Despite her charm, none ever tarried
And sadly, Dora never married.
Her will detailed her lemon cup—
When Dora died, we dug 'em up!

Poem ©1999 by Pat D'Amico

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

JUMPING WITH JIM

by Geary Danihy

I'm looking for a parking spot. I'm also laughing at myself. I feel like a character out of a novel written back when honor was still a believable, even compelling, motivation, and I'm not sure if I want to feel this way, or even if it's safe to, given my line of work.

Yesterday, after I had my last lunch with Nora Davison, I went home, sat down, and just thought. What she had said, especially about the captain on the ship, kept coming back to me. All I could think of was a book I had read back in college called *Lord Jim*. It was mainly about a guy, an officer on a freighter, who tries to live down something he's not even sure he actually did.

A graduate of West Point who later took a master's degree in English from the University of Idaho, Geary Danihy runs his own sales and promotion agency. In his spare time, the Connecticut resident acts in community theater, teaches English composition and literature, and writes fiction. His first published story introduces a private eye he intends to use in future work.

He thought the ship he was on was sinking. There were all these pilgrims on board, trying to get to Mecca, and one moment this guy Jim's up on the ship and the next he's down in the lifeboat with the rest of the crew, and he's not sure how he got there. Did he jump? Did he fall over? Was he pushed? He just doesn't know. Bad enough, but then the ship doesn't sink. When the crew finally gets into port there's their ship, already back and safe. Jim gets cashiered or something, and he goes off and tries to atone, to get his honor back. People did that back then.

I finally find a place to park my car. I lock it, then open the trunk and pull out the briefcase. I slam the trunk closed and head for the office complex where Mr. Bradley Davison works. As I walk, swinging the briefcase, I can feel the weight of the gun

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inside shift back and forth. I start to laugh at myself again.

I normally don't handle maritals. Too messy, often too confusing. Insurance fraud I understand. People running away, not wanting to be found, as natural as the sun rising and setting. Industrial espionage? Hey, it's the American way. But maritals, well, they just take too many zigs and zags; no one's ever sure what's happening or why, least of all me.

However, this one was different. This time the wife didn't want to nail the husband, she wanted to protect him. Different. Enough so that after several moments of listening to some part of my brain scream, "Don't do it. Don't do it!" I agreed to take the case.

The fact that I really liked how Mrs. Bradley Davison looked and spoke, how her eyes seemed to absorb what I was saying, as if she truly believed I had something interesting or important to say, might have had something to do with it. Some women look at a man and calculate the quickest way to make him feel small. Other women make their men feel they can go one-on-one with Michael Jordan, and maybe even win. Later, when I thought about our first meeting, I realized she had stirred something in me that I hadn't felt in a long time. I wasn't sure exactly what that was, but it felt good.

After I agreed to take the case, I let her tell her story. It appeared Bradley Davison was being blackmailed, or at least that's what Nora believed. She had found a briefcase hidden in the garage when she had gone looking for some paint thinner. She had opened the briefcase and discovered a lot of money: hundred-dollar bills, banded, neatly arranged.

"It frightened me at first, like I'd just found a dead rat, or something that had plague virus spread all over it," she said, rubbing her hands against her skirt. "All that money in our garage. It was like I was an actress in this weird movie, standing there with the briefcase open, all that money just pulsating, and meanwhile in the background I can hear Rosie O'Donnell on our TV, making wisecracks. And I can hear the audience laughing. It was surreal."

She didn't ask me if I knew what surreal meant. I was liking her more and more.

She had put the briefcase back where she had found it, then debated the rest of the day whether to question her husband. Undecided, she had let it slide that evening. The following morning, after Bradley had left for work, she had gone back out to the garage. The briefcase was gone.

"I think he's in trouble, Mr. Taylor, and I want you to help him. He's been a good father, a good provider. I don't want to see him hurt."

She didn't complete the thought. Nothing about him being a good husband, or about her loving him. I had a feeling Nora Davison had

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learned not to lie about things that were really important to her.

I'm sure Bradley Davison started out a good man. We all do. Where we end up, well, that used to be determined by character. These days, I'm not so sure what it's determined by. Maybe the Fates, maybe the Dow Jones. Who knows.

Bradley Davison was a senior vice president of an international communications company, one of those high-profile, charm-the-investors-with-technology kind of companies that barged into second-, third-, and tenth-world nations and helped them upgrade their internal phone systems from the can and string level so drug dealers and arms traders could communicate more efficiently.

He traveled a lot, mostly to Eastern Europe, which meant that his mind had been broadened and that he'd probably also had a lot of opportunities to dip his paw into many of the lucrative polluted streams that flowed over there. Chaos always breeds opportunity, and more chaos.

Given the fact that we're all now global villagers, people in my line of work need to know other people in the same line of work all over the world. We do things for each other, saving on travel expenses and the embarrassment of ordering the wrong dishes in foreign restaurants. I had contacts in South America, the Far East, Australia, and Europe; all very helpful, plus their phone numbers made my personal phone book look very sophisticated.

I placed a call to Frère Jacques (Jacques Chevalier, my very own Continental Op) and gave him the particulars on Mr. Bradley Davison and his company. Jacques was busy, but he said he would look into it as soon as he could. *Merci, mon frère.* Then I started the process of checking up on Mr. Davison back home in the good old U.S. of A., my stomping grounds.

Ah, sweet information. Today it's all available, if you know the right people (most of them nerds you wouldn't have spoken to when you were in high school) and are liberal with your checkbook (in this case, Nora Davison's checkbook). It turned out that Mr. Davison had made three recent visits to his bank, where he had a safe-deposit box in (significant point) his name only. Each visit had been made (another significant point) on the fifteenth of the month. Today was the thirteenth (a significant possibility immediately arose).

More information. Mr. Davison's phone book (or, most likely, his electronic organizer) was apparently even more sophisticated than mine. His phone records showed that he had a lot of acquaintances in Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, and a couple of the "-stans" that hadn't even existed several years ago. These acquaintances apparently preferred being called in the morning, while they were chomping on goat cheese and dunking their peasant bread in cups of ox-blood tea, or else Bradley suffered from insomnia. He had

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made most of these calls from his home between two and four in the morning. I faxed the pertinent phone numbers to Frère Jacques and then set out to get a better look at Mr. Bradley Davison.

He was a good-looking man, a little over six feet tall, with the kind of prep-school hair that easily slipped down over his forehead, giving him a boyish, pixie kind of look women used to adore. He dressed a little too conservatively for my taste, all tailored grays, power ties, and always correct, if a bit retro, wingtip shoes. But then again, I wasn't pulling down the same bucks he was.

I picked him up several blocks from his house and followed, two cars behind. Traffic was fairly light on the four-lane suburban artery we were traveling on. I knew the address of the executive complex where he had his office, so I wasn't really concerned about losing him. My eye was briefly caught by a gaggle of geese flying in bomber pattern, heading off for winter vacation. I looked back down and Bradley was gone. Damn.

I eased over into the right lane, then into a doughnut shop's parking lot. I got out, scratched my head, and looked in the four cardinal directions. South did the trick. There was Bradley's dark green Ford Expedition parked in a lot two buildings down. Frank Taylor, ace detective, strikes again. I locked my car and walked.

It was a long, two-story building, with stores on the first floor, offices on the second. Kartuchian's Oriental Rugs; above it the Delaware Casualty Company. Scandinavian Accents; above it, PharmPhresh Foods, Inc. (I bet). Shoes 4-U; above it, TMG International Trading. I chose door number three.

I went into Shoes 4-U and immediately became interested in a line of lady's black heels arranged near the window. I've always loved the way heels shape women's calves. I spent five minutes on my inspection and was starting to get worried that the store manager might have me ejected for having a too-obvious shoe fetish when Bradley came out the door that led upstairs to TMG International Trading. He walked to his Expedition and opened the driver's door. Then he placed his hands on the jamb above the door and rested his head on them. He either had a very bad hangover, or very big troubles.

He stayed that way for several seconds, then pushed himself upright and got into his car. He pulled out into traffic and drove off, leaving me holding a stylish, open-toed, sling-back model with a three-inch heel. Lovely. I reluctantly put it down, went outside, and copied down what TMG International Trading particulars there were, then walked back to my car and headed off to Bradley's office complex.

It was time to make my first report, something that could probably have been done over the phone, but that's not why I had taken

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the case. Phones are so impersonal.

I met Nora Davison at one of my watering holes, The Rusty Bucket. Local, good steaks and burgers, waitresses who knew what I ate and drank and also knew when I was working and left me alone. I took a booth in the back and waited. I was early.

She was on time. I had described her to Frank, the day manager, so as soon as she came in he greeted her and escorted her back to my booth. She slid in opposite me and gave me a tentative smile.

"Drink?" I asked.

"Too early for a martini?"

"It's never too early for a martini," I replied. I ordered, and then considered my client. Short brown hair in a cute cut; large brown eyes in an oval face that seemed made to support a smile; slightly bowed lips and a chin some might consider a bit small but I thought was just fine. She had on a simple white dress with matching white jacket, its sleeves rolled up several times to reveal thin porcelain forearms.

Our drinks arrived. "Cheers," we both said and clinked. She took a decent pull, then set her glass down and looked up at me.

"Gory details?"

"Not yet, just some slightly smudged information."

I quickly told her what I had found out—the payoffs, the phone calls—and what I was preparing to do. She listened quietly while I spoke, her eyes never once looking down or away. When I finished she sat back and sighed.

"Oh, Bradley, you dumb cluck," she said, sadness rather than anger in her voice. I remained quiet, fingers on the stem of my glass.

"About a year ago," she began, sitting forward and taking possession of her glass, "he started to change. It was like he got on an emotional roller coaster. He'd come back from a trip and he'd be way up there. He was signing deals and making a lot of money. Then, a few days later, he'd start to slide, and by the end of the week he'd be down in the dumps, sitting in his chair in the den, drinking double scotches and staring into the fireplace. Sometimes, he didn't even have a fire on. I tried to talk with him, but he kept on saying he was okay. Working too much, maybe, but he was okay."

She took another sip, then sighed again.

"What about in the last few months?" I asked.

"Worse. There weren't any more highs, just lows. He used to be really involved with the girls, go to their soccer games, go out bike riding with them. He'd even take them out to movies sometimes, said it was going on a date with two of his best girls. That all stopped. Now, he hardly even speaks to them."

I nodded. I was beginning to dislike Mr. Bradley Davison a great deal. Nora brought her hands to her forehead and kneaded the skin, then she dropped her hands and looked at me.

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"Mr. Thomas, you'll help him, won't you? He may be a little weak sometimes, but he doesn't deserve what he's going through. He doesn't."

"Mrs. Davison," I said, "I don't know what your husband is involved in yet. Some things I can do, others are out of my control."

She nodded. She understood. There might not be any salvation for her husband. Her eyes got very bright. I had to look away. Some guys just don't know how lucky they are.

When I got back there was a message from Frère Jacques on my machine. I checked the time. Late evening in Paris. I dialed his number and he answered on the third ring.

"Bonjour, mon frère. How are things in the city of lights?"

"Bonsoir, mon ami. They are delightful, as they should be. I assume you received my message." I told him I had. "Well, it seems that your Monsieur Davison is not a very nice man."

"Do tell," I said, not too surprised that I was glad to hear this. "What's he been up to?"

Women. Women down on their luck because the countries they lived in were down on their luck. Women with few talents or skills who needed to eat, or who had families, elderly parents, young children who needed to eat. Women who had only one thing to sell, themselves.

It seemed that, on the side, Bradley Davison was a glorified international assistant pimp, an arranger, the man with the money, the guy who paid the bills and made the arrangements so the girls could fly out of their countries and travel thousands of miles to end up posing for nude pictures to feed the Internet's voracious appetite, or working as crib girls, or even worse, just disappearing. Big business, a lot of money, and a whole hell of a lot of suffering.

I mentioned TMG International Trading to Jacques. He said he hadn't come across the name yet but would check it out. It probably didn't matter. I had a feeling I knew what TMG traded in. I asked him if the police over there were interested in Davison and Jacques replied that as far as he knew, not yet. Jacques had gotten his information from other sources—the competition, in fact. To them, Davison was a small fish in a sea where only sharks mattered.

I thanked Jacques and we wished each other a good evening, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to oblige; I was thinking about Davison: a nice home, a wonderful wife, apparently two great children, and still, he becomes a misery peddler. Go figure.

It was the fifteenth of the month. I followed Bradley when he left his house. He drove straight to his office. I sat in my car, keeping an eye on his Expedition but not really expecting him to go anywhere. The bank he did business with had a branch right in the

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office complex and that's where he had his private stash. Mr. Davison was a man who liked things convenient.

Around eleven-thirty I got out and walked through the parking lot, taking my time. Inside the complex I stopped at a news kiosk and studied the magazines and papers. I purchased the latest *Time,* then walked over to the shoe-shine stand that faced the elevators as well as the indoor entrance to the bank, sat up on the throne, and gave my shoes a treat.

Eight minutes later, as I was appreciating the rhythmic snapping of the soft cloth as it put a final high shine on my right shoe, the elevator doors opened and Mr. Bradley Davison appeared, briefcase in hand. He went through the bank's glass doors, turned right, and headed for the small room that contained the safe-deposit boxes. Five minutes later he was back out, briefcase still in his hand. He walked to the elevator doors. As if cued, they opened and Bradley disappeared. I paid for the shine, stepped down, and walked over to a bank of phones. I dialed Nora Davison's number. When she answered, I identified myself. She paused. I could hear her take a deep breath, then she asked what she could do for me.

"Did your husband tell you that he'd be late tonight?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "he called just a little while ago. He said there were a couple of people in from Bulgaria or somewhere and he had been asked to take them out this evening. He said he probably wouldn't be back until after midnight."

"Thanks," I said.

"Is something happening?" she asked. "Is Brad in any danger?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "I think he's going to make another payoff tonight. He's made them before and apparently nothing happened. No reason to think anything will this time."

"No reason to kill the golden goose," she said, her voice fragile.

"Something like that," I said.

"You'll be watching him, won't you?" she said, her voice rising.

"Yes, I'll probably be around somewhere."

"Don't let anything happen to him, Mr. Taylor. Please."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't like Bradley Davison. I didn't like how he made his extra pocket money. In my mind, it was simple poetic justice that someone was blackmailing him. He was getting what he deserved. Maybe he deserved a lot more for all the pain and suffering he had helped to cause.

"Nothing will happen to him," I said before I even knew the words were out of my mouth.

We were in a Ruby Tuesday's about a mile from Davison's offices. He sat at the bar, working on his third scotch. I was at one of the small stand-up counters along the wall, sipping on my Coke, watching him. He was an unhappy man who obviously didn't want to be

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late for an appointment. He kept on checking his watch every few minutes, and in between he'd cast worried glances up at the large neon clock that hung over the bar's cash register. When he wasn't busy with the time, he kept patting the briefcase that sat on his lap.

Ten minutes later we were out of there. I had a tight tail on him. The evening traffic was still heavy and I didn't think there was any chance he'd catch on that I was behind him. I was just another set of headlights in his rearview mirror. We got on the expressway and headed east. I tuned my radio to a jazz station and settled back, following Bradley's lead. We swept through the city on the elevated portion of the expressway and took the service branch that led to only one place: the airport. When the airport's exit came up I followed him down the ramp and into short-term parking. He pulled a ticket from the machine, the gate went up, and he drove through and turned right. I followed and turned left, keeping an eye on his car in my rearview mirror.

I actually got to the terminal before him. I was studying the Arrivals board when he walked through the automatic doors, briefcase in his right hand. Years ago, I would have assumed I was about to see a drop made in one of those public storage bins, the ones you feed quarters, shove your bag into, then lock with a little red key. However, these days, most airports have done away with them. Too easy to stash a bomb and just walk away.

I followed Bradley. He stopped at a Chik-Filet stand to check the time, then proceeded down the hall and stepped inside a bar area called The Flight Line, where everybody took off before they took off.

The bar was crowded. A lot of airports have also banned smoking, fearing, I guess, that people's lungs might explode right there in the lounge and there'd be a nasty lawsuit. Our airport was still this side of smoker civility: It allowed people to light up in the bars. Hence, the crowd. Added to the usual number of people who needed a couple of pops just to get on a plane were the smokers, some stoking up on nicotine prior to boarding, others just having gotten off and reacquainting their lungs with carbon monoxide and other valuable gases.

Bradley looked around. Several tables were open, but there was no room at the bar. This apparently didn't please Bradley. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looked at his watch, then glared at the occupied stools. I was less demanding. I went to one of the tables. A woman with tired eyes and varicose veins came up and took my order. I had been good long enough. One beer and some popcorn wouldn't dull my keen detecting skills. As the lady walked away, a man in a leather bomber jacket punched out his cigarette and pushed his stool back from the bar. Bradley was next to the stool before the guy could turn. The guy said something to Bradley, who took a step back, then hopped up onto

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the stool as soon as the guy cleared.

The waitress brought my beer. I paid, then grabbed a basket, opened the glass doors of a red and yellow popcorn cart, and scooped up a healthy helping. Back at my table, I commenced crunching and sipping as I wondered how Bradley was going to make the drop. Airports don't like storage bins, and they don't like packages, bags, or briefcases left around unattended. Security people are very paranoid these days.

I was enjoying my fourth or fifth handful of popcorn when Bradley stood, a scotch in front of him on the bar, the briefcase at his feet. He said something to the bartender, then turned and started walking in my direction. I almost choked on my popcorn.

He never glanced my way. Instead, he went directly to the popcorn cart, grabbed a basket, and opened the doors. He scooped up some kernels, waited a second, then dropped them back in. Then he scooped up some more, and dropped them in again. Picky eater. I was so fascinated, I almost missed the pickup. Just in time, I realized Bradley was stalling. I jerked my eyes back to the bar and Bradley's briefcase was in the hands of a small man who was moving briskly out of the bar. I stood and passed Bradley, who was still sifting. Out in the corridor I looked for my man. He was halfway down the hall, moving with the flow. I followed.

There was no way I would be able to tail this guy once he got to wherever his car was, but there probably wasn't any need. From the quick look I'd had of him, with his Eddie Bauer windbreaker and his cord trousers, I had a feeling I wasn't dealing with a crime cartel here. If I could get his license plate, I had him.

We were outside. I followed as he walked towards One Hour Parking. A real sport, but then, he had twenty grand in the briefcase. I took out my car keys and held them in my hand. We were in the lot; I let him go down a row and followed down the next. He stopped once, looked around, stared at me, then looked away as I kept walking, jingling my keys. He stopped at a Lexus, beeped off the anti-theft, tossed the briefcase inside (what the hell, it was just another twenty thousand), and got in. He drove by me as I was leaning over attempting to unlock the door of an '88 Mustang.

ZBE 976. Thank you very much. I straightened up when I saw him pull up to the exit booth. I was standing at a terminal pay phone, punching in Nora's number, when I saw Bradley go through the exit doors and out into the night.

She answered and I said, "He's all right. He's heading home."

"Thank you," she said.

I hung up, then stood there questioning my motive for making that call. Did I want her to think I was responsible for her husband getting home safe tonight? That I was some kind of hero? What did I want from Nora Davison? What did I want from myself?

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The following day I had the information I needed. Mr. Franklin Saunders. 1229 Columbia Boulevard, apartment 2G. One of the city's newest luxury condos. Mr. Saunders was doing quite well for himself. Then again, he was being subsidized.

Unauthorized entry into these luxury condos is tough. Again, with nerds and money on your side, anything's possible, but in this case neither was necessary. The gods have a funny way of working.

A Ms. Melissa Parker, only daughter of Mr. James Parker, a major player in the commodities market (very big into pork bellies) had gotten herself into a little trouble involving some cocaine and a boyfriend who eventually turned state's evidence. I had assisted the lovely Ms. Parker in extricating herself from a fling that could have turned into a nightmare. Her father had been very thankful. As for the gods? Well, Ms. Parker, bless her soul, just happened also to live at 1229 Columbia Boulevard, in apartment 3B.

I placed a call to Papa Porkbelly. A half-hour later I received a call from Ms. Parker, inviting me over for cocktails.

At seven-fifteen I walked through the condo's front entrance carrying a red and green shopping bag from the high-priced specialty market a block up from the condos. Sticking out was the top of a wine bottle and an impressive baguette. I gave my name to the front security guard. He called up to Ms. Parker's luxury apartment and was informed that the lady couldn't wait to see me. He gave me a wink as he indicated where I could find the elevators.

I was quickly deposited on the third floor and greeted by Ms. Parker, resplendent in red hair blown dry by a windstorm, a tight-fitting green cocktail dress, and heels the likes of which I hadn't seen since my foray into Shoes 4-U. She smiled and stepped aside. I went in and set the bag on a table, reached in, and pulled out a Ruger Redhawk .357 with a 7.5-inch barrel.

"Oh, my," Ms. Parker cooed, a smirk on her face.

"Don't even start," I said. "There's some pâté in there, as well as some good-looking Brie. Enjoy." I waved at her as I went out the door, slipping the Ruger into my jacket.

Down to the second floor via the fire stairs: I found apartment 2G, rang the bell, and stepped to the side so the little security camera set discreetly above the door didn't have a good angle on me.

"Who's there?" a voice crackled over the intercom next to the door.

"Really sorry to bother you, Mr. Saunders," I said, trying to get as much contrition into my voice as I could. "Peterson with building security. We're checking all the units. We've got a report about a possible gas leak."

I didn't know if he was going to buy it. Frankly, I wouldn't.

"Only take a minute," I said, not sure whether I was gilding the lily. I heard several locks click, then the door handle turned and

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there was Mr. Franklin Saunders in the doorway, the original trusting soul.

I personally don't like big handguns. Too unwieldy. Too noisy. Too messy. But everyone's seen *Dirty Harry,* and there's no sense not taking advantage of the Eastwood mystique. I didn't own a .44 Magnum, Dirty Harry's choice, but I didn't think Franklin Saunders would know the difference. He didn't. When I pulled out the Ruger Redhawk he was immediately impressed. When I suggested a conversation, he readily agreed.

I left Mr. Saunders's apartment thirty minutes later. In that time we had become quite intimate. For one thing, I'd learned how he'd stumbled onto Bradley Davison's little sideline: He'd been part of it.

Saunders was a pilot. Before coming into his newfound wealth, he had flown for one of the charter outfits that used to ferry the women out of their homelands. He had twice seen Bradley Davison deliver women to the airport. He had taken pictures. He had made notes. Definitely a man who planned for his future.

I collected the photos he had surreptitiously taken of Bradley and some of the girls, as well as copies of photos of the same girls he had downloaded from several of the Internet smut sites. I also liberated a newspaper article showing photos of a dead Romanian girl who had been found in Marseilles with her throat slit. Saunders had a shot of Bradley standing with the same girl, arm around her shoulder, apparently wishing her bon voyage.

What Franklin Saunders had that I couldn't take away with me was what was inside his head, plus his obvious inclination to use it to better himself. I explained to Mr. Saunders, displaying the Ruger Redhawk for emphasis, that I had been given an option by my employer. I could test how Saunders's head responded to a .357 round, or he could keep the money he'd already received and give me a "Swear to God and hope to die" promise to cease and desist. It was Mr. Saunders's option. Not surprisingly, he chose the latter. I complimented him on choosing wisely, switched the Ruger from my right hand to my left, and drove my fist into his stomach. He doubled over, then dropped to the plush white living-room carpet.

As I kneeled down, the gun barrel resting in front of his eyes, I whispered into his ear: "You go near Bradley Davison again, call him, write him a letter, send him an e-mail or even a singing telegram, I'll come back. I'll hit you, Mr. Saunders. I'll hurt you, and then I'll kill you. Do you understand me?"

Curled in a fetal position, he was still able to nod. I patted him on the shoulder, stood, and gathered up my little cache of blackmail goodies. On my way out of the building, I visited Ms. Parker long enough to collect my bag and drop in my gun, then I rode the elevator down and wished the security man a good evening.

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We met again at The Rusty Bucket. Our booth. She was wearing a red turtleneck tucked into jeans that favored her immensely. Two martinis stood between us. I watched her pick hers up and sip at it.

"It's all over, Mrs. Davison," I said, my left hand resting on the briefcase that sat next to me on the banquette. Inside was my haul from Franklin Saunders's apartment.

She put the glass down, her brown eyes investigating my face, perhaps trying to read something more than I was willing to show.

"What was it all about?" she asked, her eyes still on me.

I fingered the briefcase lock. She needed to know. What she did with the information was her business, but I couldn't let her walk out without knowing what her husband had gotten himself into, the kind of man he was, what he was willing to do for money. I put pressure on the lock and it clicked open. This was going to hurt her, but in the long run she'd be better off. That's what I told myself.

"You know, it's funny," Nora said, pulling the glass towards her. "When you first get married, you don't realize how important history is, the history you and your husband are going to make."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my hand still on the top of the briefcase.

"You ever been married, Mr. Taylor?"

"For about fifteen minutes."

She shook her head. "Then you never had time for the history to kick in. See, you start out thinking you have everything in common. Then time goes by and you realize you have nothing in common, but you go along with it anyway because the memories start building up. Your first apartment, your first fight, some vacations, some holidays. A mother dying, a father going through cancer."

She played with the base of her martini glass.

"Brad saw both of our children being born, saw them even before I did. We've been through chicken pox and broken bones and even a car accident. It all starts to add up and become something more than just two people, just a marriage; it becomes, I don't know, maybe like a museum, where all these things are on display, things that you expect to have around, maybe even need to have around. They tell you who you are."

She stopped, took a sip of her martini, then just looked at me.

"Your husband's no prize," I said, "but I guess you know that." My stomach was churning.

"I've known it for a long time, Mr. Taylor."

"But there's history, right?"

"Yes, the museum, and I'm one of the caretakers—no, maybe one of the trustees. Whatever. Anyway, there's responsibility there. The kind you might not really want, but there you are. You've got it. Like the captain of a ship, maybe. Even though you think the ship

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might start sinking, you stay aboard. You know what I mean?"

My hand fell away from the briefcase. I knew what she meant. I didn't agree, but I understood.

So now I'm walking towards Bradley's office complex, briefcase in hand. Inside is my little treasure trove and the Ruger. I'm about to drop in unannounced on Mr. Bradley Davison and have a little chat. I don't know if he'll listen to me, or if he will even care about what I have to say, but it's the least I can do for Nora.

Franklin Saunders has been neutered. But he was never really the threat. He wasn't what Bradley was worried about when he rested his head against the side of his Expedition after he came out of TMG International Trading. Those boys play a rougher game than Franklin Saunders. They're right up there with Attila the Hun and Vlad the Impaler. You irritate them, like I think Bradley has irritated them, and they'll come after you, your wife, your kids, and your canary. They don't care. There are no rules in their world, except the ones they make up right before they pull out their knives.

Earlier this morning, I went down to my basement and pushed around some old boxes. I found my college copy of *Lord Jim*. I blew the dust off, wiped away some cobwebs, and brought it upstairs. I poured some coffee and sat at the kitchen table thumbing through the book, noting passages I had underlined back when the world was simpler and I didn't have so many scars. I thought about what I would have done in Jim's place. Jump? Who knows. And if I did, would I then seek redemption? Find my lost honor? Did such a thing matter anymore, or even exist?

I'm still thinking about that as I stand in front of the elevators, waiting for a brass door to slide open and whisk me up to where they cut deals, not throats. Will Bradley Davison listen? Does it matter? I don't think he's cut out to handle his playmates with the knives. It's not his type of game. And sooner or later, they'll come after him and his family. They'll come after Nora.

There are only two ways to stop them. One is to make Bradley Davison go away, permanently. The other is to make TMG International Trading go away permanently.

You never know what you'll do when you think the ship's sinking. Some people jump, others stay. The thing about staying is, you never get a chance to do it again. You just go down once. Maybe that's the point. If you're going to stay, going to go down, you might as well do it right, with a little class.

Maybe, after my little talk with Bradley, I'll price out some leather boots, the ones with those killer heels that remind you there's always a little pain mixed in with love. Yeah, as I remember, Shoes 4-U is having a sale. Then maybe I'll go upstairs and show them to the boys at TMG. Find out their opinions on love, and pain. ●

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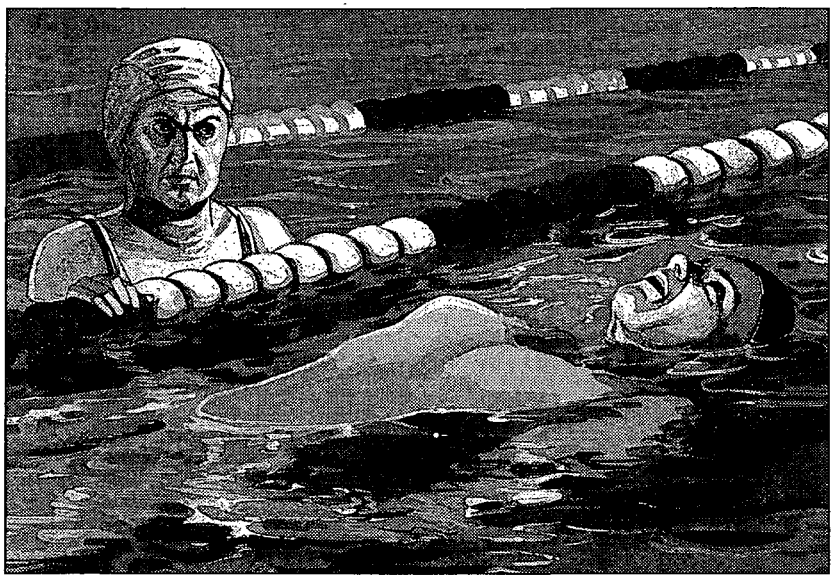

Art by Mark Evans

TIME IN THE LAP LANE

by Ann Ripley

Roberta's time in the lap lane was up, and everybody including Susan McLelland knew it, the rehab pool being about as intimate an environment as a frog pond.

Nor could Roberta have failed to comprehend that she had already swum for twenty minutes: A gigantic clock that even a blind person could read was perched at the deep end of the pool, its bold red hands showing the minutes and seconds hurrying by.

The loudmouth Nate even warned her. He raised his big, bald head higher above the water and called jovially, "Hey, 'Berta, your time is up!" Because her head was encased in a cap, she couldn't hear, and she continued plying her way back and forth in a slow backstroke.

Susan could smell trouble, and she didn't like it, for she loved this hot, intergenerational puddle. Its air was filled with gentle jokes, good-natured ribbing, and occasional gossip. It attracted people of all ages from all over their little Midwest college town, some recovering from surgery or bone breaks—even an occasional injured child, who would be eased into the water and treated as gently as an uncooked egg. Some were more robust and came

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mainly to swim laps. But most of the regulars simply were older men and women fighting arthritis.

Fifty herself, Susan was recuperating from crushed bones acquired in a serious car accident. She was considered almost a baby by the regulars, whom she had grown to know and care for over recent months. It could be truly said that the friendships she'd made here were just as important as the strengthened muscles she had rebuilt.

As Roberta continued her illegal swim, some people's eyes widened: They knew there would be repercussions. The next swimmer signed up on the board was Emmy, a good-natured retired nurse. Little Emmy hopped up and down in the middle of the pool, trying not to look daggers at Roberta.

Ann Ripley's four published mystery novels for St. Martin's Press all center around gardening, for her series sleuth, Louise Eldridge, is a PBS garden show host—a most original occupation for an amateur sleuth. Ms. Ripley has selected an unusual setting for her first short-story mystery for *EQMM*: a rehab pool in a small Midwest college town. Like to see more of her work? Try *The Garden Tour Affair* (St. Martin's 1/99). ❡

Of course, Emmy was not the only person hopping up and down: Hopping was one of the favorite exercises of the several dozen morning bathers at the hospital's therapy pool. Others strode, waggled, or sidestepped Martha Graham-style back and forth across the pool. Some exercised with paddleboards or yellow plastic dumbbells, while others dangled in deep water embracing snakelike blue plastic objects called "noodles" as if they were feather boas.

The Roberta problem had arisen today because more lap swimmers were showing up at the pool; this made the single lap lane inadequate. People took to arriving before the pool opened to line up at the door. Once in a while, a newcomer who didn't know the sign-up rule slipped into the lane and then was shooed out and left to stand sheepishly about with the hopping arthritic crowd and wait his or her turn.

Susan already knew that Roberta was a commanding person: Her husband Carl drove her to the pool in their Lexus and dutifully entered, removed his elegant gloves and coat, and strode in a bored fashion around the lobby area until she was finished. From the moment she went to the locker room and pulled a bathing suit over suspiciously firmed-up breasts, Roberta continued to command attention. She was about sixty, with dyed red hair that she covered with a black bathing cap, and an almost-over-the-top buxom figure that caught the eyes of the men; most of them

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weren't as fussy as they used to be about women's figures. She would gather plastic dumbbells, noodles, and barbells on the edge of the pool, stand there with hand on outthrust hip, and warn everyone in a loud voice, "Now, nobody else dare touch these; they're *mine.*" Once in the water she would hold her plastic dumbbells high, demarcate a certain path, and begin her hopping "twist" across the pool. Heaven protect anyone who got in her way.

But when she cut into someone else's lap time, that was a step too far: The unfairness of it hung in the steamy pool air like an evil presence. The pool attendant, a shy blond young man named Bryan, was no help: He never entered into pool politics, just sat behind the reception desk and read his sci-fi novel. He was not prepared to move unless someone had a genuine problem, such as drowning.

Susan, who was holding onto a metal bar doing leg kicks, surreptitiously watched as Emmy lost her patience. After several minutes had elapsed, she shoved through the water to the shallow end of the lane and waited for Roberta to arrive. Alarmed, Susan wondered if the much shorter Emmy might need help; she let go of the metal bar and swam as easily as a turtle closer to the coming confrontation. She was awed, as always, at how graceful she was in water, as compared to how inept she had become on land.

"Excuse me," Emmy called, in a voice quavery with nerves. Roberta plowed by like a backwards paddleboat to the end of the pool. She stared straight through Emmy, then calmly turned over and started plying her way back to the other end.

Looking like a small doughboy woman, Emmy clutched the rope barrier. "Hey, *wait!*" she yelled, throwing aside a good seventy years of middle-class gentility. "I'm *talkin'* to you!" It was as if she were the product of a tough inner city.

Out of sheer pride, Susan suspected, Roberta quit swimming and stood up, busty and dignified, and glared down at Emmy. "I *beg* your pardon? Are you speaking to me?"

Expecting the worst, Susan did a couple of unobtrusive breaststrokes to guide her body nearer to the quarreling twosome. Emmy stood for a moment, trembling, and then made a courageous move, diving under the buoy-decked rope and surfacing right next to Roberta. She blew out a little water, like a small whale, and then stood up, looked Roberta in the eye, and said, "You know darn well I'm talkin' to you. Your lap time was up about ten minutes ago."

Roberta took in the watching crowd and decided to give up. She cast a snooty glance at the time clock at the edge of the pool and then acknowledged, "My time is up *now.* I didn't start until five after the—"

"Baloney," said Emmy and then, in supreme disdain, turned away from the woman and began a slow, expert Australian crawl.

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Susan had to move fast to avoid confronting Roberta when the woman exited the lap lane, so she swam underwater, making quickly for a stone bench against the kiddie-pool section where people sat with their grateful butts against jets of incoming water. She scrambled to a sitting position just as Roberta strode by on her way out of the pool. She glared at Susan. "Don't try to kid me: You were listening to everything."

The minute she was gone, Susan swam back to the pool center, where the bathers were clustered, talking about the fray. It was by far the most exciting thing that had ever happened at the pool.

"I saw that coming," said the handsome, white-haired George, not taking it too seriously since he was a deep-water treader, not a lap swimmer. "Bet she cheats at cards, too," and he laughed.

Elderly Maud, who three decades ago had given up lane swimming, but not her charitable manners, quavered, "You've got to forgive Roberta. She's not a bad person—just gets carried away sometimes."

"Oh, yeah," scoffed Alice, a hefty woman in her sixties with carefully blond-dyed hair. "She gets carried away, all right." Her strong body proclaimed that she once was a serious athlete. Being cheated out of lap time was not to be taken lightly.

Beth said quietly, "You're right—she's not carried away: She knows exactly what she's doing." Surprisingly stern words from the ever kind Beth, who furnished Susan with a constant supply of self-help books on health, nutrition, and restoring bones. She was the city librarian. Tall and muscular, and probably in her mid forties, she was a dedicated swimmer, wearing a snorkel in the pool so she could practice for swimming with the dolphins on an upcoming Mexican vacation. Now she adjusted the snorkel over her face and swam off to the shallow end, done for the morning.

"Maybe we could use another lap lane," offered Susan.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," said Alice, "nobody would ever do anything that practical around this place. We'll have to take care of this ourselves. The fuddy-duddy committee that runs this pool has its head in the nineteenth century, when people went to spas and never swam a single stroke." Susan was surprised at the venom of her words; Roberta did not bring out the best in people.

The pool jokers, Nate and Jerry, two robust men with barrel chests who used the metal bars like trapeze artists, put in their opinions.

"I say let the ladies duke it out," offered Nate.

"Yes," said Jerry, a man of huge but solid bulk, "at a time and place to be determined."

"But not *in* the pool," said Nate. "We don't want to contaminate it with blood or excess hair!"

Susan looked at them, bemused. She knew their story: They

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were semiretired wealthy business lawyers who spent their days golfing together, coming to the pool first for a little warmup of their leg muscles. Sometimes it was impossible to have a serious conversation with them, for they acted as if they had never left sixth grade. On the other hand, she heard they supported worthy charities and knew they were more serious-minded than they appeared.

Susan reflected that one couldn't make a final judgment of character by cursory contacts with bathers in swimsuits. Maybe even Roberta's character was better than it appeared. Yet people in this town knew Roberta well, and Susan had seen people react negatively to her before this: Beth was upset because Roberta led a perennial and so far losing fight to cut back library funding to balance the city budget. Emmy politely despised the woman for reasons that were rumored to go back several decades and had to do with a fight over a man. Even the jovial Nate and Jerry had a grudge: Just today, Roberta bragged again within their hearing that her Carl had won a big lawsuit against a company the two men represented. Jerry had stared darkly at Roberta. Nate politely pretended he hadn't heard the nasty words floating over the surface of the pool.

That was it, thought Susan: Everyone here at the pool tried to pretend that Roberta was a nice person, even when she wasn't. Out in the town the gossip was less gentle, and included the news that the debonair Carl was running around with a younger woman with less cellulite on her hips than his wife.

To free her mind of all this fuss, Susan closed her eyes and concluded her leg kicks. She loved these moments alone; the accident had left her with badly mangled legs, but with her senses keener than ever. The sight and physical order of things. The touch of things. The smells. She savored them all: the gentle, innocent odor of the pool's hydrogen peroxide as it bubbled up and enveloped her; the pattern with which the guards stored equipment on the sidelines; the soft lapping of the water against her thin shoulders, reminding her of the touch of the beloved one she lost in the car crash . . .

By the time she opened her eyes, many of her cohorts had departed the pool; the rhubarb apparently had cut into everyone's recreation time. Even Emmy had finished her laps early. When Susan reached the women's locker room, the place was noisy and full, and she had to wait in line for a shower.

She had forgotten Roberta, Emmy, and the incident by the time she removed her bathing suit and extended the zen moments with a very hot shower. She wrapped herself in her towel and limped into the dressing room, prepared to enter the real world again. Myriad smells of body lotions and soaps mingled in the close air—traditional smells worn by the older women, hipper scents from the younger crowd. Maud, enclosing her sagging breasts inside an

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ample brassiere, was saying, "It's a shame Roberta makes such a bad impression."

Susan's eyes darted around. "Has she left?" she asked quietly. There were many cubbyholes for lockers and lavatories in the women's dressing rooms.

"Oh, yes, she's disappeared," said Alice, shoving a heavy sweatshirt over her braless body. "Probably can't stand around like she usually does, boasting about how rich and successful her husband is, and how nice their new house is."

Susan took a cursory look around the place, sticking her head into the cubbyhole for the coats and lockers, then squatting down to see if Roberta was parked in one of the bank of toilets. "Something's funny. Roberta could never have gotten out of here so soon. Where has she gone?"

"Maybe to complain to the management," said Beth; she had rinsed off her hands and arms and was now drying them. "She'll be back in a while."

"No wonder we have so much more room today," laughed Maud. Everyone noticed how Roberta strewed her towels and several swim bags across the benches as she anointed and dressed herself.

Then they heard the scream. It was a bloodcurdling sound that had emanated from Trina, a slim, pale woman recovering from back surgery. Because of a shortage of lockers, she had hung her coat on the coat rack in the far room, next to a storage closet. Then, to their horror, they heard the sound of a body dropping to the hard cement floor.

With Susan limping behind them, they ran down the hall to see what was the matter. Bryan and other male bathers, attracted by the noise, soon joined them.

The young woman lay on the floor in a faint in front of the open storeroom door. Unlike Susan, who had ignored the partially opened door, Trina had looked inside and found Roberta. She was lying on the floor amidst the racks of foam equipment, next to a pile of buoy-studded rope used as a lane marker. Her head was split open on the side, and blood quietly streamed from the wound. She was wearing only a bra and panties.

They all stared, mouths agape, until the usually taciturn pool attendant asserted command. *"Okay,"* he barked. All his emergency training had risen to the fore and made him a man to be listened to. "Everyone step aside now and give me room to administer CPR."

"Oh, c'mon, now, Bryan," said Nate, ever the joker. He had shoved his way to the front of the crowd. *"You* might enjoy mouth-to-mouth, but this lady isn't going to profit from it: She's dead, man."

Susan was standing next to the body and could second that. Suddenly, her gorge rose and she turned and stumbled out of the room.

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Bryan shoved her from behind, unbalancing her, muttering, "He's right. We need the police." He took Susan's shoulders as if she were a little statue, helped her regain her balance, then raced out.

Susan stood still and held her diaphragm until the urge to vomit had passed. Then she went back to her locker to dress but like some of the others, was still in a state of dishabille when a parade of policemen came in, ignoring their half-clothed state. Flustered, the women threw their clothes on and fled to the pool area, where the men had already gathered.

Like a bad joke, the unreliable vent system had chosen to malfunction today, creating a heavy fog upon the water; to Susan it looked like smoke hovering over Hades. Completing the picture was the damp group of anxious people clustered near Bryan's desk, who looked like they had just crossed the River Styx. Some, like Trina, were almost inconsolable, and nurses summoned from the hospital wing bustled around giving medication to her and others who needed it. Policemen began taking their names and addresses, while a cadre of men and women in dark blue shirts and pants and carrying satchels passed by into the locker room to collect evidence.

They watched as Roberta's husband Carl was told of his wife's death. His face impassive, he stared back at them, acknowledging Nate and Jerry with a nod. He entered the women's locker room area and emerged looking pale under his tan, then went into a huddle with a man in plain clothes who appeared to head the investigation. Susan had never had a chance to see him up close, but had to admit he was impressive in his well-cut suit and, today, even his impeccable topcoat and gloves. His iron-gray hair was slicked back in a courtly, rather old-fashioned cut. But most notable was the way he stood, just like his late wife, one hip out, stylish, arrogant, unrelenting. If he was sad over her death, he didn't show it.

Bryan, in his usual sneakers, shorts, and hospital T-shirt, stood talking to another policeman. It was obvious that his rehabilitation-pool bathers meant more to him than any of them had ever realized; his sandy eyebrows drooped forlornly like a spaniel's, and he seemed ready to cry. He threw his hands out in pathetic little motions, as if swatting flies, trying to explain why this abomination had happened in *his* pool.

As the minutes ticked by on the huge poolside clock, the swimmers began to recognize the truth. Nate expressed it, and the others nodded in solemn agreement: "We should have spotted it right away—the police don't think it's an accident."

"Good heavens," said Susan, "what does that leave?"

Maud, standing next to her, gave her a good jab in the side. "What do you think, you little dummy?" and then chuckled nervously and grabbed Susan's arm with a trembling old hand. "Sorry, honey, I didn't mean to bark, but all this makes me real nervous."

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Susan looked into the woman's worried eyes and guided her to a chair, occupied by a man. "This woman needs to sit down. Do you mind?" He got up, Maud plopped down, and a nurse zeroed in to help.

Suddenly she noticed that a policeman was at her side. "Ma'am," he said, "would you step to the side here? The pool guard said you might help us."

"Me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. Susan McLelland? We heard you witnessed an altercation in the pool earlier."

"Well, yes—but didn't we all?" She looked around wildly for support, and saw her erstwhile buddies looking at her with remote expressions in their eyes, as if this gaunt, slightly crippled woman were someone they barely knew.

Alice, always a little bold, perhaps because she was a blonde, broke the strained silence by calling, "Officer, honest, Susan didn't do it." Her little titter of laughter died in the gathering fog. Emmy gently rebuked her while the policeman gave her a dirty look and stood in front of Susan, blocking her view of her friends but not their voices.

Susan looked up into the officer's serious eyes and thought, *Is poor little Emmy going to be blamed for this?* She blurted out, "Emmy wouldn't have done it!"

"Who—you mean the one arguing with the victim in the pool over time in the lap lane?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't, or couldn't? She was swimming laps, but got out of the pool well before the body was found and all the screaming started. That makes her a very good suspect."

"Oh." Susan's heart sank, for she liked Emmy—but then she liked all her pool buddies: They were like her family. Thoughtfully, she pushed a strand of wet hair out of her eyes and wondered how she could keep Emmy from getting arrested. "What do you want to know from me?"

"Well, ma'am, the lifeguard, Bryan, says you're one who observes things. Who introduces people to each other, and knows a lot of people's names. Like, the queen of the rehabilitation pool." A smile passed briefly over his face to think of this woman before him described as a queen. The smile disappeared. "He thought you just might have seen something funny going on."

She felt stunned, faced with death again. Six months ago she had been pinned in a wrecked car with her dead husband crushed against her. It had taken her a half year to convince herself that life was even worth living. And now, another look at death. How did she get mixed up in the apparent murder of a woman she didn't even like? Slowly, she forced her mind to focus on various scenarios.

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Did the husband do it, or another man? Maybe it was Nate or Jerry, boiling over at last. Such violence, with the result a broken-headed body on the floor, pointed to a man—or did it? Plenty of the women bathers had gained enough strength to do it: After all, wasn't that what this daily exercise was about—strength building?

Suddenly a thought came that set her heart racing: Supposing she put forth a theory that led the police to the wrong person: How would she ever hold her head up again among her pool buddies? Then she remembered how her husband had always lauded her ability to sort out complicated situations, and she calmed down again.

The most important thing was to save her friend Emmy. The only way she could do that was to help find the killer.

"Mrs. McLelland, uh . . . you okay?"

When she nodded, he continued: "Let me tell you what happened in there. There are several doors to the storeroom, one accessed through the women's locker room, the other through the men's locker room, though it was locked. And a third door from the hospital's entrance hall. Not locked. That means someone could have approached from two ways. Probably they hit her with one of those tools there, perhaps not: Maybe the fall to the concrete floor killed her, though we doubt it. Now, family members are always considered in cases like this. But we'd like to know if you know someone else who might have wanted to do her harm."

She stared into space, barely able to see her swim chums through the deepening fog. Yet she sensed they were straining to hear every word of this conversation. "Could we go back into that room?"

"Sure. Think that would help?"

She exhaled. "Officer, I don't know. But there was something about that room . . . maybe a smell."

Having noticed her limp, he took her elbow and guided her into the women's dressing room. In the storeroom, two men busy dusting for prints stepped aside to allow her and the officer to approach the body.

Oh, Roberta, she thought, looking at the drooping, pale face, *I never had a chance to really know you, or was that the real you that we saw each day?*

"It's right around here." Although an odor seemed to surround the body, this other scent was so strong in her nostrils that it overrode the smell of death. Susan mustered all of her courage and leaned down close to Roberta's body and took a good sniff. Patchouli oil. She had known and disliked this penetrating smell all her life.

Roberta did not wear it. Little Emmy did not wear it. But Susan knew who did. And that person's patchouli oil lotion had been smeared onto the body in some kind of physical contact. Telling police would prove Emmy's innocence, but implicate another of

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her dear friends. She pulled in her breath, just barely stopping herself from blurting out, *I recognize that smell!*

But the policeman suspected she knew something. He crowded up beside her, took a sniff, then looked at her in confusion. "Can't smell a thing," he said gruffly.

She lowered her eyes. "I—I could have been wrong." Suddenly the atmosphere became too much, both the smells and the little lie she was telling: Just as her stomach began turning again, the officer hurried her out of the room, as fast as her uneven legs would take her. Gratefully, she took deep breaths of the overheated air as they walked back to the pool room.

She could sense the impatience in the policeman walking beside her. "So, first you smell something, and then you don't smell something. Quite frankly, ma'am, I feel like taking you into the station for questioning. I know darn well you're covering something up."

"I—" she said, feeling so weak she thought she might drop to the concrete floor. For the first time in her life, she faced the agony of choosing between friendship and civic duty. She didn't know yet which she would choose.

The others stared at her when they returned. Susan looked over at them: Emmy, Nate and Jerry, Maud, George, Alice, Trina.

Beth.

Beth was standing there in her jogging outfit, anxious, probably, to get downtown and open her always endangered library. She caught Susan's eye and they gave each other a long look. Then, the librarian shoved her hair back from her face and called out, "Officers, I have to talk to you." She smiled at Susan and nodded, as if to say, "It will be all right." She didn't want Susan to carry the burden of this secret.

To the cluster of police now gathered around her, she said, "It happened when we were alone in the locker room. I was terrified. I don't know why I didn't tell everyone immediately that it was an accident. But yet, I can't believe she's dead. She didn't look dead, only stunned, not even unconscious, when I left her. Why, I don't know *where* the blood came from, and that crack in her skull. We were getting dressed after our showers, and we had some words. Then, Roberta started batting at me, screaming at me, shoving me down the hall. . . . She chased me into that little room. When I tried to get away, she threw herself at me, tripped on the rack, and fell down. I—I kept expecting her to walk out of there and start chewing me out again . . . " She broke into sobs, and the police took her aside for a more private interrogation.

The swimmers looked at each other, amazed. Maud said, "Will they charge her with murder?"

Nate, the lawyer, beckoned them to gather round, as if he were a judge summoning a conference at the bench. In a low authoritative

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voice, he said, "Maybe involuntary manslaughter. But if we vouch for her, I wouldn't be surprised if they don't even charge her."

"Vouch?"

"We're all witnesses to state of mind: We can all tell the police what we saw. It wasn't Beth who was in a fury—Beth's never in a fury. It was Roberta who left the pool mad as a wet hen." His eyes bright with excitement, he warmed to his tale, rubbing a comforting hand over his bald pate, as if straightening phantom hair that was no longer there. "First, she's angry and humiliated because Emmy called her on running overtime in the lap lane. Then, she encounters Beth—a gal who embraces pacifism, homeopathic remedies, swimming with dolphins, and what Roberta views as extravagant book purchases—and she's angry at her, too, because Beth represents the overspending, egghead liberal she hates so much. She starts a cat fight, trips, and her head connects with the cement, and *voilà*—in a sense she kills *herself!*"

Relief should have washed over Susan like a large, restorative wave, but instead she felt as if something were terribly wrong. She said, "There's something else: If Beth saw no blood, there *was* no blood when she was in that room." She glanced over at Roberta's husband, standing back in the crowd with an inscrutable expression on his tanned face. Wearing his impeccably cut leather gloves and coat.

She limped over to a police officer. "I think I have some information for you," she said quietly. And she told him her theory. Carl meandered at will each day and knew the layout of the building. Upon hearing a fuss within the women's locker room, he could have come in through the outside hall door to the storeroom and encountered Roberta, stunned from her minor fall. Then, he could have quickly picked up the hammer from the toolbox and bashed her head open.

"If I were you, I would ask to examine his suit and hands closely."

The officer frowned. "We might have done that, anyway, although he was pressing to keep an appointment and then drop back to police headquarters later. But just why would that occur to you?"

"It's his habit. He's a man of habit. Today he's wearing gloves and coat inside here, when he has never done that before. I think he slipped them on after he killed Roberta and found that her blood had spattered on him." Sensing the gaze of Susan and the officer, Carl eased toward the exit door of the pool, but the policeman intercepted him.

"A few more questions, sir," he said, and the look in Carl's eyes told Susan she was right.

What a tremendous relief: She wouldn't have wanted to give up one of her swim buddies, even if they had killed, for over the past months, they had saved her life. ●

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THE DARK PRINCE

by Joyce Carol Oates

The power of the actor is his embodiment of the fear of ghosts. (From *The Actor's Handbook* and *The Actor's Life)*

I guess I never believed that I deserved to live. The way other people do. I needed to justify my life every hour. I needed your permission.

It was a season of no weather. Too early in the summer for the Santa Ana winds, yet the harsh dry air blown from the desert tasted of sand and fire. Through closed eyelids you could see flames dancing. In sleep you could hear the scuttling of rats driven out of Los Angeles by the crazed, continuous construction. In the canyons north of the city the plaintive cries of coyotes. There had been no rain for weeks, yet day followed day overcast with a pale glaring light like the inside of a blind eye. Tonight above El Cayon Drive the sky cleared briefly revealing a sickle moon of the moist-reddish hue of a living membrane. *I don't want anything from you, I swear! Only just to say—You should know me, I think. Your daughter.*

That night in early June the blond girl was sitting in a borrowed Jaguar at the side of El Cayon Drive, waiting. She was alone and she appeared to be neither smoking nor drinking. Nor was she listening to a car radio. The Jaguar was parked near the top of the narrow graveled road where there was a fortresslike property, vaguely Oriental in design, surrounded by a ten-foot cobblestone wall and protected by a wrought-iron gate. There was even a small gatehouse but no one was on duty inside. On lower ground, spotlights flooded properties and sounds of laughter and voices

The following self-contained "mini-mystery" also forms part of *Blonde*, Joyce Carol Oates's new novel about Marilyn Monroe (HarperCollins 1/2000). Already out, in 1999, are three new Oates books: the novel *Broke Heart Blues* (July '99/ E.P Dutton); *My Heart Laid Bare*, a novel from Plume (July '99); and *Collection of Hearts*, the author's latest volume of short stories from Plume.

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lifted like music through the warm night, but this property, at the summit of El Cayon, was mostly darkened. Around the high wall there were no palm trees, only Italian cypresses, twisted by the wind into bizarre sculpted shapes. *I don't have any proof. I don't need any proof. Paternity is a matter of the soul. I wanted just to see your face, Father.*

A name had been given the blond girl. Tossed at her as carelessly as a coin tossed at a beggar's outstretched hands. Eager as any beggar, and unquestioning, she'd snatched at it. A name! His name! A man who'd possibly been her mother's lover in 1925.

Possibly?—probably.

Amid the debris of the past she'd been scavenging. As a beggar too might scavenge trash, even garbage, in search of treasure.

Earlier that night at a poolside party in Bel-Air she'd asked please could she borrow a car?—and several of the men had vied with one another offering her their keys and she was barefoot running, and gone. If the Jaguar was missing for too many hours the "borrowing" would be reported to the Beverly Hills police, but that wasn't going to happen for the blond girl wasn't drunk and she wasn't on drugs and her desperation was shrewdly disguised. *Why, I don't know why, maybe just to shake hands, hello and goodbye if you want it that way. I have my own life of course. I won't be losing anything I'd actually had.*

The blond girl in the Jaguar might have remained there waiting through the night except a private security guard in an unmarked car drove up El Cayon to investigate. Someone in the near-darkened mansion at the top of the hill must have reported her. The cop wore a dark uniform and carried a flashlight which he shone rudely into the girl's face. It was a movie scene! Yet no music beneath to cue if you should feel anxiety, suspense, humor. The cop's lines were delivered flatly so you had no cue from him, either. "Miss? What business do you have here? This is a private road." The girl blinked rapidly as if blinking back tears (but she had no tears left) and whispered, "None. I'm sorry, Officer." Her politeness and childlike manner disarmed the cop immediately. And he'd seen her face. *That face! I knew she'd got to be somebody, someday. But who?* He said, faltering, scratching at the underside of his slightly stubby jaw, "Well. Better turn around and go home, miss. If you don't live up here. These are kind of special folks live up here. You're too young for . . ." His voice broke off though he'd finished about all he had to say to her.

The blond girl said, starting her borrowed car, "No, I'm not. Young."

It was the eve of her twenty-third birthday.

In her purse, the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson she figured now, maybe she'd never use. ●

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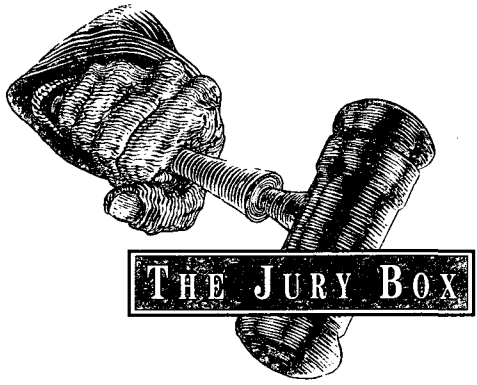

by Jon L. Breen

Historical mysteries continue to appear in profusion, more and more of them set in the recent past. The novels reviewed below spend all or part of their time earlier in our waning twentieth century, beginning with two that represent the current trend to alternate between present and past.

***** Peter Dickinson: *Some Deaths Before Dying,* Mysterious, $23. Nonagenarian Rachel Matson, a lifelong photographer who is physically helpless but mentally acute, tries before her imminent, inevitable death from a wasting illness to solve the mystery surrounding a split pair of antique duelling pistols owned by her late husband Jocelyn, survivor of a Japanese prison camp during World War II. The mystery is not so much who done it as what happened, which is gradually revealed through Rachel's memories and the legwork of her full-time nurse Dilys, one of several marvelously drawn characters. The best of Dickinson's elegantly written novels deserve the label classic, arguably representing the ultimate detective story: a real mystery, logically, fairly, and surprisingly resolved, and solidly rooted in character.

**** Peter Robinson: *In a Dry Season,* Avon, $24. The latest novel about troubled Yorkshire cop Alan Banks provides a textbook example of parallel narratives, either of which would provide an enthralling and comprehensible story on its own, drawing strength from each other to form a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The investigation by Banks and his new partner Detective Sergeant Annie Cabbot (a complex and likeable character) of the origin of some World War II-era bones found in a deserted village that had been flooded for a reservoir alternates with a first-person narrative of village life in the early forties. The plot and characters are expertly handled, and the fascinating details of the British

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homefront provide a bonus.

**** Max Allan Collins: *Majic Man,* Dutton, $23.95. In the latest in a remarkable series, Chicago private eye Nate Heller takes on the Roswell flying-saucer mystery along with the suicide of former Secretary of Defense James Forrestal. Among the other characters are muckraking columnist Drew Pearson (a Heller client in previous volumes), his legman and successor Jack Anderson, and President Harry Truman. Once again Collins turns real-life events into a cogent fictionalized mystery plot and (even more difficult) real people into full-fleshed fictional characters. The climax is a clear homage to Collins's literary hero, Mickey Spillane.

**** Gillian Linscott: *Absent Friends,* St. Martin's, $22.95. With World War I ended and women finally having attained the vote, British suffrage activist Nell Bray agrees to stand for Parliament in a rural constituency while investigating the death of another candidate, who was blown up by a booby-trapped firework during an armistice celebration. This is an excellent job in all areas and should inspire readers (like me) who have somehow overlooked this series to seek out the previous seven volumes. (Slight complaint about a book generally sound on period language: The verb "bad-mouth," African-American slang dating from a much later period, would not have been used in 1918 U.K.)

*** Thomas Swan: *The Final Fabergé,* Newmarket, $23.95. Twenty-five pages of scenes from 1916 Petrograd (featuring Imperial Egg maker Fabergé and the notorious Rasputin), 1941 Leningrad, and 1963 Estonia set up a well-constructed present-day thriller with the last of the legendary eggs as McGuffin. In his third adventure, Scotland Yard arts expert Jack Oxby proves a stalwart hero in the tradition of (though smarter than) Nayland Smith, while his main adversary is as evil, if not quite as colorful, as Fu Manchu. One of this Fearless Leader's biggest mistakes is splitting up his Boris-and-Natasha team. The well-realized background of post-Soviet Russia is a plus.

** Jeanne M. Dams: *Death in Lacquer Red,* Walker, $22.95. In the first of a new series, Swedish immigrant Hilda Johansson, servant to the wealthy coach-making Studebakers of South Bend, Indiana, turns indomitable sleuth when murder strikes the family next door. The upside: a well-researched background of South Bend in 1900, including a visit to Notre Dame University; a likeable heroine, albeit an extremely unlikely detective even among fictional amateurs; interesting details of servant life in the tradition of *Upstairs, Downstairs;* and a generally successful avoidance of imposing present-day attitudes and values on characters of the past. The downside: an extremely

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thin and unsatisfactory mystery with snail-paced plot movement.

** Sam McCarver: *The Case of Cabin 13,* Signet, $5.99. The first case for Professor John Darnell, self-proclaimed "paranormal detective," is yet another whodunit set on the voyage of the *Titanic,* a tiny sub-genre your reviewer can't resist. While the dialogue is rather stilted and the promising mystery plot (the series of apparent suicides in first-class cabins 13 on White Star liners) fizzles somewhat, McCarver's first novel does a fine job with the disaster itself, along with more of its aftermath aboard the *Carpathia* than is found in most *Titanic* fictions.

** Keith Miles: *Saint's Rest,* Walker, $24.95. The second novel about Merlin Richards, Welsh architect and Frank Lloyd Wright acolyte, plying his trade in 1931 Chicago, has a good story to tell about the building of a house to the specifications of a rich man's failed-movie-star wife, and the characters come to life. On the minus side, English novelist Miles's dialogue, though convincingly American, often wrenches the reader right out of the period. Three of the most glaring anachronisms: a reference to panty hose, "shrink" as slang for psychiatrist, and "pad" as slang for domicile. (Max Allan Collins [see above] is also early with "shrink," which slang dictionaries date to around 1960 as an abbreviation for "headshrinker," but 1949 is closer than 1931.)

Most of the stories in the original anthology *Murder on Route 66* (Berkley, $6.50), edited by Carolyn Wheat, are either set in the historic roadway's past or look back on it with tempered nostalgia. The editor's own contribution, "Too Many Midnights," is nothing short of dazzling in its structural mastery, and Barbara D'Amato's chilling "Motel 66" is another highlight. Series shoppers can find new cases for two Chicago cops, Michael Allen Dymmoch's John Thinnes in "Shades of 66" (okay) and Eleanor Taylor Bland's Marti MacAlister in "The Canasta Club" (better). The unconventional ending of Gary Phillips's "'53 Buick," about L.A. private eye Ivan Monk, may cause mystery traditionalists to cry foul. In "Rappin' Dog," Dick Lochte's team of private eye Leo Bloodworth and precocious teen Serendipity Dahlquist, thanks to the latter's unique narrative voice, provide the best of the series entries.

If your taste runs to real-life historical mysteries, *The Mammoth Book of Unsolved Crimes* (Carroll & Graf, $10.95), edited by Roger Wilkes, is a generous 570-page anthology of 36 true-crime accounts by specialists like Edmund Pearson, William Roughead, and Jonathan Goodman, plus writers as varied and renowned as Eric Ambler, James Thurber, Julian Symons, Alexander Woollcott, Colin Wilson, Damon Runyon, Christianna Brand, and Rebecca West.

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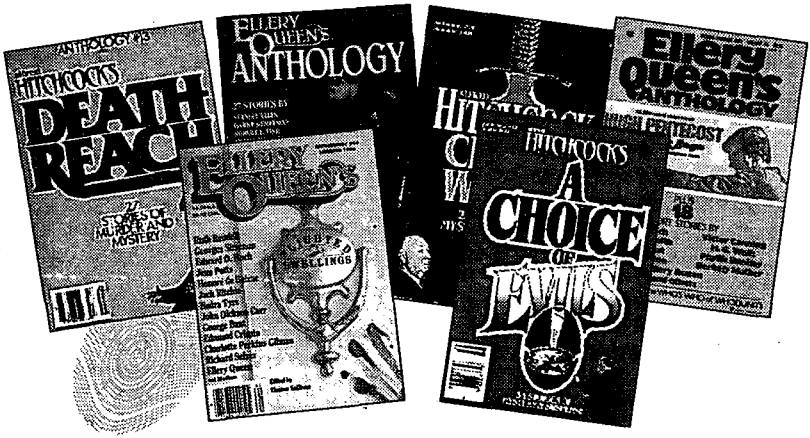

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The Petty-Cash Killing

by Parnell Hall

"I don't believe it."

Uh-oh. That was a bad sign. All I'd done was walk in his office door. Since I'd known Sergeant MacAullif for years and had walked into his office dozens of times, there was nothing particularly remarkable about it, which made the fact he was unable to believe I had done so all the more significant. I had a feeling I knew why, though I did not wish to voice it. Instead, I flopped down in a chair in front of his desk and said, "Gee, MacAullif, what is it you don't believe?"

MacAullif took a cigar from his desk, leveled it at me as if it were a gun. "You. I don't believe you. Here you are, Stanley Hastings, walking into my office all casual like, as if you were about to pass the time of day, when you and I both know that isn't true."

"You don't wish to pass the time of day?"

"Don't be a wise guy." MacAullif took the cigar, drummed on his desk. His doctor'd made him give up cigars, but he still played with them from time to time, when he needed something to do with his hands, like when he had to restrain himself from hitting someone. "I made an arrest this morning. A homicide arrest. One Quentin Beasley. Shot his business partner in his office late last night. Frederick Lowell, B and L Securities, office on Twelfth

Parnell Hall's series P.I. Stanley Hastings is modeled, loosely, on his creator. Like Stanley, Parnell Hall is an actor and screenwriter, and also a former private eye whose stock in trade was investigations for negligence lawyers. In Stanley Hastings's first case for *EQMM*, his regular client, negligence lawyer Richard Rosenberg, has accepted a murder case and Stanley finds himself calling on a friend in the NYPD for a lead . . .

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Street." MacAullif cocked his head at me. "Any of that ring a bell?"

"MacAullif—"

"Can't you answer a direct question? Would it be too much to ask, just for once? Particularly since I was having a very good day until you dropped by."

"I certainly hope it continues."

MacAullif nearly gagged. "You certainly hope it continues? Well, why don't you *help* it continue? Tell me you have no interest in Quentin Beasley and that's not why you're here."

"Well, actually—"

"Well, actually," MacAullif said. He snorted in disgust. "The man asked for a lawyer—not that unusual a request when one is arrested for murder—but he asked for a lawyer, and who does he call? A negligence lawyer. Not the best move when facing a murder rap, but that's okay by me, if the guy wants to be stupid, he sure has that right. And I'm actually happy as a clam until I learn which negligence lawyer he called."

"It was a surprise to Richard."

"I'll bet it was," MacAullif said. "And what did Richard Rosenberg do? Did he advise Mr. Beasley that he wasn't a criminal attorney and suggest that he call another? Did he offer to refer him to someone else?"

"MacAullif—"

"Or did he take the case and send his number-one investigator over here to abuse a friendship and interrogate me?"

"Is that how you see it?"

"Is that how it is?"

It certainly was. Richard Rosenberg, New York City's most ambitious, tenacious, and industrious negligence lawyer, whose ever-increasing client list was filled by persistent advertising on TV, was actually a frustrated Perry Mason at heart who loved nothing better than strutting his stuff in front of a jury. So, when the Quentin Beasley case came along, he grabbed it and sent me over to work on MacAullif just as the sergeant had surmised. Though that wasn't quite how I would have put it.

"Of course not," I said. "I would never abuse our friendship. On the other hand, if we could help each other in this case . . ."

"Help each other?"

"If Beasley's innocent you don't want the case to go to trial. Then you'd have to get on the witness stand and testify. You'd wind up looking bad."

"With Rosenberg cross-examining, that's a given," MacAullif said. "I don't mind looking bad if the guy goes to jail."

"Even if he's innocent?"

"Give me a break."

"I'm trying to. MacAullif, if the guy's innocent, I'll tell you first. I

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won't let you go on the stand and have Richard hand you your head. If I can prove the guy's innocent—not in legal terms, but enough to satisfy me, or, more to the point, enough to satisfy you—I'll let you in on it and you can act accordingly."

"And what if you can't?"

"Huh?"

"What if you can't prove the guy's innocent? What if he's guilty? You know what happens then? Rosenberg takes me on cross-examination and tries to make me look bad in front of a jury. 'Cause he's got nothing else, and it's his best shot at gettin' the guy off."

I nodded. "Makes sense. Seems to me, you're better off if he's innocent."

"Don't start with me."

"Come on, MacAullif. Convince me the guy is guilty."

"What would you do then?"

"I'd tell Richard to cop a plea."

"He'll listen to you?"

"Not for a minute. But I'll be glad to tell him."

MacAullif scowled. "Couldn't you have *pretended* he might listen?"

"You're a hard man to please. Why don't you tell me what you know so I'll get out of your office and you can get on with your life?"

"Am I supposed to find your candor refreshing?"

"Now you've done it. Tell me about the case, or I'll tell the other cops you used the word *candor.*"

"Very funny," MacAullif said. "Here's the facts of the case. Mr. Beasley, who likes to play the ponies, had been dipping into the till. His partner caught him at it, and he killed him."

"You have any proof of that?"

"No, we arrested him on a hunch."

"What sort of proof have you got? Come on, MacAullif, convince me I'm wasting my time."

"You're certainly wasting *mine,*" MacAullif said. "The records of the firm show that over the past six months Beasley siphoned off close to five thousand dollars from petty cash."

"*Petty* cash?"

"That's right."

"Five thousand doesn't sound so petty."

"It is when you string it out over six months. I'll tell you what we got, 'cause it's no secret, and then you'll go away. We got a petty-cash drawer full of bogus receipts."

"Bogus?"

"Well, genuine receipts, but not for anything Beasley ever bought."

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"These receipts tallied?"

"Once a month."

"Tally check?"

"On paper, sure."

"So what's the problem?"

"The problem is, up until six months ago, petty cash had been averaging two hundred dollars a month. Suddenly it's up to a grand. Bookkeeper smells a rat, mentions the fact to Frederick Lowell. Lowell freaks out, calls Beasley on the carpet, wants to know what's going on. What's going on is, Beasley's stealing the partnership money. When Lowell catches him at it, he pops him."

I frowned.

"What's the matter?"

"Little simplistic, MacAullif."

He grimaced. "I forgot. You grew up on murder mysteries. You resent anything simple and straightforward. I got news for you. In real life, ninety percent of the time, what you see is what you get. Innocent until proven guilty is a nice concept, but the fact of the matter is, most of the guys we arrest look guilty because they are."

It was one of MacAullif's favorite lectures. I ignored it, said, "You got anything else on Beasley?"

"The gun."

"Huh?"

"It was Beasley's gun. Bought and registered in his name. Kept in his desk drawer. He must have slipped it in his pocket at the first sign of trouble."

"Which was?"

"When Lowell asked him to step into the bookkeeper's office."

"Oh? When was this?"

"Last night after work. The way we dope it out, yesterday afternoon the bookkeeper tells Lowell about the shortage. Lowell decides he wants to talk to Beasley alone. He waits until the bookkeeper goes home, calls Beasley into the bookkeeper's office. Beasley's suspicious, takes the gun. Lo and behold, Beasley's right, Lowell's onto him. Confronts him with the books. Threatens to go to the police. Beasley pulls the gun, shoots him."

"And . . . ?"

"What do you mean, *and?*"

"What does he do then?"

"Drops the gun on the floor and gets out of there."

"Drops the gun on the floor?"

"That's right. That's where we found it. Right next to the body."

"That doesn't seem right. If he knows it's his gun, why wouldn't he take it away?"

MacAullif shrugged. "Maybe he doesn't want to be caught with

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it on him. Or maybe he's smart enough to realize the first thing the cops will ask him to do is produce the gun. Anyway, he leaves it there and goes out for a night of drinking and carousing. He arrives at work this morning to find the office full of cops. Including yours truly, who places the gentleman under arrest."

"Who found the body?"

"Bookkeeper. Arrived for work, opened the office, there he was."

"He called the cops?"

"That's right."

"He's the one told you about the shortage?"

"Of course."

"You have any corroborating witness?"

MacAullif made a face. "What do you mean, *corroborating witness?* We got motive, opportunity, and the murder weapon. Beasley's not talking, and there you are. Perhaps there's a good explanation for these facts, but no one's providing it. If a suspect wants to remain silent, he certainly has that right. That way he can't incriminate himself, but he can't prove himself innocent either."

"Uh-huh," I said, heading off another favorite lecture on the failings of Miranda/Escabedo. "And who might this bookkeeper be?"

Winston Delmar didn't look like a bookkeeper, or at least my stereotypical idea of a bookkeeper. I had envisioned a little man with wire-rimmed glasses, a receding hairline, and a pocket full of pens. Winston Delmar was a flashy dresser with a wavy pompadour and boyish grin. He had a one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise building on East 84th Street that must have run him a lot of money, seeing as how he was too young and the building too new for him to have lived there long enough to have benefited from rent control.

Winston Delmar ushered me into a starkly modern living room that probably reflected some trend of which I was not aware, and indicated a rather uncomfortable-looking leather chair. "Please sit down," he said. "And what can I do for you?"

I sat gingerly on the chair, found it wasn't as bad as I'd expected. "As I said on the phone, I'm the investigator for Mr. Beasley's attorney. I was hoping you could tell me what happened."

Delmar plopped down on the couch, ran his hand through his hair. "I can, but I still can't believe it. It was such a shock."

"I'm sure it was. You're the one who found the body?"

"That's right. I came to work this morning, eight o'clock, same as usual. I opened the office, walked in, and there he was."

"Where?"

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"In my office. On the floor. By my desk. Lying there in a pool of blood. With the gun by his head."

"By his head?"

"Yes."

"Was his hand on the gun?"

"No, it wasn't. The gun was lying next to him on the floor."

"Where was his hand?"

"Which hand?"

"His right hand."

"Under the body."

"Oh."

Winston Delmar frowned. "Not that it matters, but he was left-handed."

"Oh?"

"Not that it matters."

"Where was his left hand."

"On the floor. By the gun."

"By the gun?"

"Yes, but he didn't shoot himself, if that's what you're thinking. He was shot in the head, yes, but not where you shoot yourself. A suicide, you point the gun at the side of your head. Or you put it in your mouth. Freddie was shot right in the forehead. Dead center. No one picks up a gun, turns it around, aims it at their forehead."

"Still, it could be done."

"Yes, but so what? Don't the cops have a test can prove if someone fired a gun? Freddie wasn't wearing gloves. If he'd pulled the trigger, it would show. They'll be able to prove he wasn't, so you're wasting your time."

"I see you've thought this out."

"What else can I think about? What a disturbing thing."

"Uh-huh," I said. "You feel responsible?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Since you're the one who brought up the discrepancy in the books."

He waved it away. "Can't think like that. Yeah, I told Freddie about the books, that there was a problem with petty cash. And maybe that's what he got killed over. But to say I'm responsible? What, I'm *not* gonna tell him? I'm gonna cover it up, let things go on? Then I *would* be guilty of something."

"Uh-huh," I said. "How long *had* you been covering it up?"

Winston Delmar's boyish smile froze on his face. "I beg your pardon?"

"How long had you known about the shortage before you brought it to the attention of Mr. Lowell?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You just said not bringing it to the attention of Mr. Lowell

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would have been covering it up. If you knew about it for some time and only brought it to his attention now, weren't you covering it up?"

"No, I was not. I was merely being cautious. I was keeping an eye on petty cash to see if there was something wrong. When it turned out there was, I brought it to Mr. Lowell."

I noted that, under stress, Winston Delmar had stopped referring to the deceased as Freddie. "How do you know it was Mr. Beasley that was short?"

"Are you kidding? It was his petty cash."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? How do I know anything? It was his vouchers."

"What do you mean, his vouchers? How does your petty-cash system work?"

"There's a petty-cash drawer. The partners take money out of it, replace it with receipts. Once a month they reconcile their petty cash. They take all the receipts, add 'em up, itemize 'em on a voucher. The amount on the voucher should cover the amount of petty cash they spent that month."

"And Beasley's vouchers didn't add up?"

"Oh, they did. They just got bigger and bigger, and started to include bogus items."

"Such as?"

"Dinners that never happened. Office equipment that didn't exist. For instance, this month I found a receipt for forty-nine dollars listed *Office Equipment.* But, if you look close, the receipt was from Tower Records for four CDs."

"And you looked close?"

"I sure did. This was an escalating situation. The amount of petty cash Beasley was going through was increasing every month. I was aware of it not only because I had to reconcile these petty-cash statements, but because as bookkeeper I was responsible for keeping cash in the petty-cash drawer. I did so by writing checks every time the balance got too low. Which got to be more and more often."

"So your signature's on those checks?"

"That's right. That's why I had to tell Freddie about it. I had to protect myself."

"Uh-huh. Tell me about these vouchers. Were they handwritten?"

"No, they were typed."

"On a typewriter."

"No, a word processor. It's a program, actually. A specific form. You call it up, type in it. Prints in a grid. Pretty neat, actually."

"Uh-huh. And are these vouchers signed?"

"Signed? No."

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"Then how'd you know whose they were?"

"Are you kidding? It's typed on the form. Part of the program."

"The signature is typed?"

"It's not a signature. It's a heading."

"Right. But it's typed?"

"Sure."

"Okay," I said. "Let me ask you something. If it were actually *Mr. Lowell* who was taking the money out of the petty-cash drawer, what would stop him from typing Mr. Beasley's name on a petty-cash voucher?"

Winston Delmar's eyes widened. "He couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"I'd know it. When two vouchers came in with Mr. Beasley's name on them."

"Yeah, but suppose they didn't. Suppose Mr. Lowell waited until Mr. Beasley filled out his voucher, then took that voucher and added to it. Or wrote a new voucher incorporating those receipts into it along with a bunch of others. And at the same time filled out a very modest voucher for himself. Wouldn't that create the situation that you have now?"

Winston Delmar's mouth was open. "I don't believe it. You're trying to prove Mr. Lowell was guilty?"

"I'm not trying to prove it. I'm asking if it's possible."

"Possible? It's ridiculous. What, Freddie was the one dipping into the till, and he got a sudden attack of remorse and shot himself?"

"No, but if he was taking the money, it opens up a lot of possibilities. Say Lowell's the one taking the money. You go to him, tell him you've discovered a shortage. You suspect Beasley, but Lowell knows better. He's gone to great lengths to make you suspect Beasley if it ever came out, but, still, he doesn't want it to come out. Because the one person who will know it isn't Beasley is Beasley. So Lowell stays behind at the office, not to confront Beasley, but to cover his tracks. Only Beasley is suspicious and catches him at it. Cornered, Lowell pulls the gun. Beasley struggles with him, and it goes off."

Winston Delmar was staring at me, open-mouthed. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. After all, you and I have no idea what really happened. Anything is possible. That's why I'm asking you. Can you point out any flaw in what I've just told you?"

Winston Delmar blinked. "Is that what Quentin says he did?"

"If it was, would it be true?"

"Of course not. It's ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Freddie wouldn't do such a thing."

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"And Quentin Beasley would?"

Winston Delmar said nothing, set his jaw.

I smiled. "Come, come, Mr. Delmar. I know you don't want to speak out of turn. But it's important to sort out what happened here. You find it impossible to believe Frederick Lowell could be dipping into petty cash, but you have no problem believing it was Quentin Beasley. Aside from the name on the vouchers, which anyone could have typed, do you have any reason to prefer one to the other?"

Winston Delmar squirmed. "I don't like this."

"Me neither. But the cards are on the table. You already told the cops about the shortage. And you told 'em it was Beasley who was short. You got anything to back that up?" I put up my hand. "You understand something. You're not under oath, and I'm not talking about what can be legally proved. Just between you and me, how come you think it's Beasley?"

"Just between you and me?"

"Please."

"His lifestyle." Winston Delmar shrugged. "I already told this to the cops. It's no secret. Quentin Beasley likes to party. I've seen him myself, out on the town, with a number of women."

"He's a bachelor?"

"Divorced. Paying alimony *and* playing the field. Not to mention the ponies."

"The ponies?"

"Sure. Beasley's a gambler. And, frankly, not a very good one. Always playing long shots that don't come in."

"How do you know this?"

"How do I know anything? There's an OTB right on our corner. Beasley likes to stop in on the lunch hour, get some money down. Almost every day."

"How do you know they're long shots?"

"I'd ask him now and then—What did you bet on? It was always some dog. And the one or two times he did manage to hit, he'd brag about it to anyone in sight."

"Plus you'd seen him in the OTB yourself?"

"That's right."

"Interesting," I said. "You know anything about the gun?"

"Sure. It's Quentin's gun. He bragged about it, too. Kept it in his desk drawer, took it with him when he had to carry large quantities of cash." Winston Delmar smiled. "Which wasn't often with his track record. Still, the time that long shot came in, he flashed the cash around the office, made a show of wearing the gun home."

"He bring it back the next day?"

"Oh, sure, he made a show of that, too. Came in, put the gun in

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the drawer, announced that, thanks to it, no one had held him up. As if anyone cared."

"And this is the gun that killed Mr. Lowell?"

"That's right."

"How do you know?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How do you know it's Beasley's gun? Did you recognize it?"

"Oh, sure. The police will do ballistics work, whatever it is they do, match up the bullet, but, hey, it's his gun. Thirty-two Smith and Wesson revolver, just like his. Plus, his gun's missing from the drawer." Winston Delmar shrugged. "You do the math."

"I see," I said. "You tell all this to the police?"

"Of course. It's a murder investigation. I'm not going to lie."

I wondered about that.

Richard Rosenberg wasn't impressed. "This? You bring me this? Why don't you bring me something I can use?"

"Are you kidding? I thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased? Why should I be pleased?"

Richard Rosenberg got up from his desk and began to pace around his office. A little man, he burned up twice the calories of a big man through the expenditure of a seemingly inexhaustible amount of nervous energy. Rosenberg was a demon in court, whom opposing counsel went out of their way to avoid. His out-of-court settlements were large, his in-court settlements legendary. Dealing with him was never easy. But through the years I'd learned to take the verbal pummeling in my stride.

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "You should be pleased to have something to argue."

Richard opened his mouth.

I held up my hand. "Not that you wouldn't anyway. I am aware you are capable of contending those petty-cash vouchers weren't Quentin Beasley's even if he'd had them signed and notarized. But this is so much better than that. The forms were typed on a computer. Anyone could have done it."

"Including the deceased, Mr. Lowell?" Richard said ironically.

"Why not?"

"Why not? All right, let's examine why not. Make me a case against Frederick Lowell."

"You think his death exonerates him?"

"Of course not. It just makes him harder to prosecute. But that's not my worry. Go ahead. Sell me on the fact Lowell did it."

I gave Richard a summary of the theory I'd outlined for Winston Delmar, that Lowell was the embezzler, that Beasley caught him at it, Lowell tried to kill him, and Beasley shot him in self-defense.

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When I was finished, Richard frowned. "I can't say I like that theory much."

"No?"

"No. Particularly when the bookkeeper himself is a much more likely candidate."

"Oh?"

Richard sat on the edge of his desk, twiddled his thumbs. "Absolutely," he said. "Who would know better how to manipulate the petty cash. He wrote the checks. He tallied the vouchers and balanced the books. If he was dipping into the till, it could easily go unnoticed, since no one was double-checking him." He cocked his head. "You have anything to support that theory?"

"Sure," I said. "The guy is young, a flashy dresser, maintains an expensive East-side apartment. He claims to have seen Quentin Beasley out on the town, which means he's out on the town himself. He mentions seeing him with several women, which means he goes out as a regular thing. Winston Delmar, I mean. He's the only witness the police have, there's no corroboration. If he'd been siphoning off money and attributing it to Beasley, he could have killed Lowell perfectly well."

"Anything else?"

"Plenty. He also mentions seeing Beasley in OTB. He says Beasley always played long shots, an idea he characterizes as stupid. Which indicates, one, the guy's familiar with OTB and, two, he knows enough about horse racing to ridicule a betting style. Which means he probably gambles himself.

"He also knows all about the gun. He knows what kind it is, what caliber it is, where it was kept. He also knows the police will be able to tell who fired it. He brings that up to pooh-pooh the idea Lowell could have shot himself, says the police will be able to tell Lowell didn't fire the gun. He doesn't mention the paraffin test by name, but he knows there is a test. Which would be in his mind if he'd been the one to fire the gun and had been careful to wear gloves when he did so."

"Interesting," Richard said.

"The idea the bookkeeper could have done it?"

"No, the fact you didn't present it to me. What you just told me shows you've given it some thought. Yet you come in here and advance the theory the corpse is the embezzler. Which any fool could see is far less likely. And why do you do that? Because you actually suspect the bookkeeper—that's your own little pet theory—but you're afraid if you offer it I'll reject it. So you withhold it and let me come up with it myself, figuring then I'll think it's my theory, and I'll be happy with it." Richard nodded. "I find that very interesting."

So did I, since that was exactly why I hadn't offered the book-

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keeper as a suspect. "Well put, Richard. So what do you think of the theory?"

"I find your ruse, however transparent, nonetheless effective. The bookkeeper certainly seems an excellent red herring."

"Red herring?"

Richard waved it away. "Let's not get involved in semantics. He's an ideal suspect. One I will probably use. Not that we'll need it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"We have an alibi witness."

Cindy Summer chewed gum in a way that defined the word cheap. It was as if she'd seen a gun moll in a fifties B movie and never gotten over it. Which was too bad, because Cindy was an attractive young woman, who ordinarily would have had a lot to recommend her. But it was hard to get past the gum.

Or the jewelry. Cindy wore a lot of jewelry. Rings, necklaces, bracelets—and I am using the plurals advisedly—Cindy wore several of each item, as if not trusting one to do the job. Unlike the gum, the jewelry did not make her look cheap. It occurred to me it would have cost a lot of petty cash.

"That's right," Cindy said. "Quentin was with me."

"And when was this?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"From what time on."

She batted her eyes. "What time do you need?"

"It's not a question of what we need. It's a question of what's true."

"Why?"

I blinked. The gum was disconcerting. Was she really as dumb as she looked, or actually rather smart?

I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. "We need to know what really happened. So we can plan our defense accordingly. You're not talking to the police, you're talking to me. You don't have to sell me on a story. Just give me the facts.

"That's for starters. The other reason you gotta tell the truth is the assistant district attorney. He'll rip you to shreds if you don't. In which case, Quentin Beasley is history. You're his alibi. If his alibi cracks, he's gone. It doesn't matter if he's innocent or not, the jury won't listen to anything after that. You understand?

She popped her gum at me, made a face. "Don't be stupid. Of course I understand. You don't wanna tell me what you need, fine, we'll do it your way. When was Quentin Beasley with me? Yesterday afternoon from after work until he went to work this morning."

"He spent the night?"

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"Yes, he did. Are you horribly shocked?"

"I think my heart can take it. Had he ever done so before?"

"Yes, if it's any of your business."

"It will be the assistant district attorney's. Does he live here?"

"No, he doesn't."

"But he does stay over occasionally?"

"That's right."

"And last night was one of those occasions?"

"Yes, it was."

"What time did he get here?"

"Right after work. He came over straight from work, took me out to dinner."

"Where?"

"Huh?"

"Where did you go to dinner?"

"Oh. A little restaurant down the block. I forget the name. We often eat there."

"You often eat there and you forget the name?"

"Hey, it's not like it has a neon sign. It's a little hole-in-the-wall place. I can get the name if you want. If you think it will back up my story. But the fact is, I eat there all the time and I don't know the name."

"And you did last night?"

"That's right."

"Who waited on you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you eat there all the time, you must be familiar with the waiters and waitresses. I wonder if you could pick out the one who served you."

"Well, I can't. I didn't even notice. Why would I?"

"Was it a man or a woman."

"I didn't notice."

"Yeah, well, I bet they noticed you. And it will be my job to find the one who waited on you. To corroborate your story."

"Fine. You do that. We were there, and that's the truth."

"They also might remember what *time* you were in there."

"Well, that's better than I can do. I don't wear a watch. See?"

She held out her wrists, which proved nothing. They contained so many bracelets any number of watches could have been hidden among them. I decided to take her word for it.

"All right," I said. "You have a clock in your apartment?"

"Of course."

"Good. What time was it when Quentin Beasley got there after work?"

"I have a clock. I wasn't watching it. I'm not that kind of person."

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"Well, can you fix the time from something else? Like, were you watching a TV program?"

"No, I was taking a nap. The doorbell rang. It was Quentin. He'd come over straight from work."

"You have no idea what time?"

"No, you'll have to ask him. But it must have been pretty early."

"Why?"

She popped her gum. Smiled.

"What time was his partner killed?"

If Quentin Beasley's girlfriend didn't inspire confidence, the man himself inspired even less. I met him the next day in Richard's office, going over the facts of the case, when Richard had me report on what I'd found.

Nothing I'd found prepared me for Quentin Beasley. Until I met our client I'd thought of Winston Delmar as a flashy dresser. Quentin Beasley made him look like a bum. His tie probably cost more than my whole suit. Beasley was a handsome man with a boyish face that probably would have looked totally sympathetic if his features weren't a little too angular. I wondered what Richard would do about that.

Beasley listened attentively while I went over what I'd found.

"Well," Richard said. "What do you make of that?"

"A fine job," Beasley said. "Well presented."

"I wasn't asking you to comment on his performance," Richard said. "How about the facts of the case."

"I think he has them accurately," Beasley said. "I'm sorry about Cindy, though. She ought to remember what time I got there."

"And what time was that?" Richard said.

Beasley raised his eyebrows. "We have a time of death yet?"

"*We* don't. The cops may."

"Well, for the record," Beasley said, "I left work early. I got up to Cindy's apartment before five."

"That's not what the bookkeeper says," I pointed out.

"Yes, but he's lying," Beasley said. He looked at Richard. "Isn't that the theory—the bookkeeper's lying because he's actually guilty?"

"It certainly could have happened that way," Richard said.

Beasley spread his arms. "Well, there you are. If the bookkeeper's lying about tipping Freddie off to a petty-cash shortage, he could be lying about when I left work."

"Yes, he could," I said. "His particular lie is that he went home at five and you and Mr. Lowell stayed behind."

"Just the opposite," Beasley said. "I went home and Freddie and Winston stayed."

"And what time was that?"

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Quentin Beasley frowned, turned to Richard. "Is he supposed to be questioning me?"

"No, he's not," Richard said. "Stanley often exceeds his authority. I've tried to break him of the habit. Stanley, more facts and less interrogation, if you please."

"Certainly," I said. "The facts are, Cindy Summer is a nice girl, but she isn't gonna help us with the time element. She also isn't gonna help us with the jewelry."

"Jewelry?"

"Yes. She wears a lot of it. Enough that it attracts attention. Practically demands it. If she wears that much in court, the prosecutor is gonna wanna know where it came from." I turned to Quentin Beasley. "If it turns out you bought her any, he's gonna insinuate it came from petty cash."

Beasley shrugged. "Let him insinuate. He can't prove it."

"Maybe not," Richard said, "but there's no reason to push it in his face. We can tone down the jewelry on the stand."

"Even so, he'll go after the petty cash," I said. "The bookkeeper's prepared to testify about the petty-cash vouchers and the bogus receipts."

"Which we are prepared to deflect," Richard said. "Those vouchers are computer generated and unsigned; they could have been prepared by anyone. Including, and especially, the bookkeeper himself."

"That's right," Beasley said. "They can't tie that to me. And even if they could, those receipts aren't bogus."

I blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"What's bogus about the receipts? They're absolutely genuine."

I blinked again. My mind was racing, and I didn't like where it was going. "Winston Delmar doesn't claim the receipts aren't genuine. He says the expenses they're covering aren't legitimate. He claims you got a bunch of receipts and added 'em up to cover the shortage. For instance, one receipt is from Tower Records for about fifty bucks. It's written up as office equipment. He figures you threw that receipt in to cover money you'd taken."

"Well, that shows you how much *he* knows," Beasley said. "You think Tower Records carries nothing but CDs? It has answering machine tapes, it has computer programs." He shrugged. "I see nothing unusual about that."

Richard said, "What's the matter, Stanley? You don't look well."

"It must be something I ate," I said. "Well, Mr. Beasley. You're saying the Tower Records receipt is legit?"

Beasley tugged at his expensive tie, sniffed arrogantly, cocked his head. "Sure, why not? Let 'em prove it isn't." He smiled, shrugged. "What's the big deal?"

"No big deal," I told him.

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Alice got right to it. "So, what you gonna do?"

"I don't know."

"Uh-huh," Alice said. She adjusted the flame under the frying pan in which she was simmering the shrimp curry. My wife is an excellent cook, and the aroma was out of this world, almost made me forget my troubles.

Almost.

"I made a promise to MacAullif."

"What did you promise him?"

"Huh?"

"As I recall, you promised you'd let him know if your client was innocent."

"Right."

"If he isn't innocent, you don't have to let him know."

"Alice."

"What did you say you'd do if your client was guilty?"

"Advise Richard to cop a plea."

"Did you do that?"

I had. Out of earshot of our client. Nonetheless, Richard had acted as I'd expected. One might have thought I'd suggested he gargle cyanide.

"I told Richard. He won't listen."

"So, you kept your promise, what's the big deal?"

"I have kept my promise within the strict, technical limits of what was said. My position would hold up in court. That's not the point. I told MacAullif if I could prove my client innocent, not in legal terms, but in terms that would satisfy him, I'd do it. I'm gonna withhold this from him because I can't prove it in legal terms?"

Alice sighed, shook her head. "Stanley, what do you wanna do? You wanna walk into MacAullif's office, say, I got good news and bad news. The good news is, I found out who did it. The bad news is, it's my client."

"That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny. I'm trying to be serious. Is that what you wanna tell MacAullif?"

"I don't know what I wanna tell MacAullif. The fact is, my client took the petty cash. I come up with a nice, reasonable, alternative hypothesis for him, that the bookkeeper actually did it, but does he go along with it? No. The guy's so arrogant and stupid that he misses the point and argues that the petty-cash expenses were legit. Which doesn't help him much, with the bookkeeper insisting they weren't and with his partner dead. If the expenses are legit, *why* is his partner dead? The bookkeeper wouldn't have any motive to kill him, either."

"I got all that," Alice said. "If Beasley insists the receipts are

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genuine, it means he took the money, which means he killed his partner. Is that what you wanna tell MacAullif?"

"Not on your life. 'Cause Richard's gonna shut Beasley up, advance the theory the bookkeeper did it, and raise reasonable doubt. Toward that end, he will cross-examine MacAullif as vigorously as possible and try to make him look like a fool."

"You gonna tell *that* to MacAullif?"

"That's what I promised him I would."

"Uh-huh," Alice said. She tasted the curry, added a dash of wine. "So what you're saying is, you can't tell MacAullif any of the facts of the case, all you'd be able to tell him is in your opinion your client's guilty and Richard's gonna humiliate him?"

"That's about it."

"MacAullif will not be happy to get such news."

"No kidding."

"You might be better off saying nothing. Decide what evidence you have is inconclusive and need not be acted upon."

"I suppose."

Alice turned off the flame, lifted the pan from the stove, spooned the curry over a platter of pasta. She set the platter on the table, looked at me.

"So," she said, "what you gonna do?"

Sergeant MacAullif was on the phone when I came in, instructing the detectives at some crime scene or other on what he wanted done with the evidence. When he saw me he never missed a beat, just cradled the receiver on his shoulder and reached for a cigar. He unwrapped it, rolled it between his hands, and twirled it with his fingers while speaking rapid-fire into the phone. When he was done, he slammed the receiver down with his left hand while holding the cigar with his right.

He looked at me narrowly, as if searching for a clue.

He didn't get one.

He frowned, cocked his head.

"Well," he said, "what's up?"

I hesitated. It would have been so easy just to tell him, as Alice had suggested, that my investigation was inconclusive.

But I couldn't do that.

I sighed.

Smiled and shrugged.

"I got good news and bad news." ●

Erratum: On page 94 of the July, 1999, *EQMM,* at the conclusion to Andrew Vachss's story "Big Sister," an erroneous dedication appeared, reading: "For Margaret Engelke." The dedication should have been: "For Doris Engelke." Our apologies to Mr. Vachss.

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MAKEOVER

by Barbara Callahan

"Writing humor is an unfunny process," Barbara Callahan once told *EQMM*. When she first sat down to write "Makeover," it was intended to be a serious tale — "but the story had other ideas." If the writing of a satirical piece such as this is "unfunny," it may be because the humor touches painfully close to home. Haven't we all met the frumpy woman in the polyester pantsuit? Ms. Callahan turns a wicked eye on midlife marriage crises.

On our first wedding anniversary thirteen years ago, Todd gave me a diamond tennis brac-elet to mark the occasion. A firm believer in romantic rituals, I insisted that Todd slip the bracelet on my wrist and clasp it firmly shut on every subsequent anniversary as a symbol of our unbroken marital bond. In the years one to ten, the bracelet slid on as smoothly as the glass slipper onto Cinderella's foot.

On our eleventh anniversary, Todd raised his eyebrows tolerantly as he squeezed my wrist to make the bracelet fit. On our twelfth, he grimaced along with me as he squeezed harder to circle it around my wrist. On our thirteenth, an anniversary that should be skipped on the basis of numerical toxicity, Todd gritted his teeth as he forced the clasp shut and sent the diamonds skittering across the carpet on our bedroom floor.

"Maybe we ought to have the bracelet made into dangling earrings, Emily. Your earlobes seem to have escaped the padding you've systematically applied to the rest of your body courtesy of every fast-food chain in town."

Taking more care not to trample on the diamonds than he did on my heart, he neatly arranged his workout clothes in his duffel bag and left for the gym.

Addressing each diamond as if it were a daisy petal, I choked out the words, "He loves me, he loves me not" until reaching the final glittering traitor—an "He loves me not."

Of course he loved me not. How stupid of me not to recognize it sooner. If Todd had loved me, he wouldn't have insisted on his for-

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tieth birthday, three years ago, that I cook him those dreadful meals. He claimed that a Spartan diet of brown rice, tofu, and veggies would fend off the "forties fifteen," the inevitable weight gain attested to by his friends who had lumbered into that decade before him. And if Todd had truly loved me, he would not have insisted that I enroll in that exercise class led by a bouncy anorexic dedicated to eradicating the "forties flab." Unlike Todd, whose workouts energized him, mine propelled me home to the restorative comfort of the living room sofa.

No wonder that I supplemented my diet with Taco Toros, Pizza Parnassian, and Seriously Sinful Shakes. No wonder that I skipped exercise class so often that my fellow sufferers awarded me a fake Olympic gold medal for truancy. And no wonder that after Todd's cruel remark I headed immediately out to Le Barbeque d'Andre to buy Le Grand Burgaire and a side of the Fries of France.

En route, to distract myself from my own pain, I turned on the car radio to listen to the problems of strangers. Monty Malaise, the talk-show host of *Misery Loves Company,* was inviting a tearful young woman to "share your misery and whine to your heart's content because we're here for you, Buttercup." Monty addressed all his women callers as Buttercup and the men as Hydrangea, a technique that invariably made the callers divulge their first names.

"My name's not Buttercup, Monty, it's Stephanie."

"Okay, Stephanie, now tell Uncle Monty and all those audio voyeurs out there in their kitchens and cars what's making you miserable."

"I'm in love with a married man," she wailed.

"Poor baby," yawned Monty.

"And he loves me too," she sniffed.

"So what's the problem?" asked Monty in the interested tone of one who is busily buffing his nails.

"He won't ask his wife for a divorce."

"Why not?"

"She inherited a lot of money three years ago and controls all their finances. If he leaves her, we'll have to make do with his salary as a junior accountant and mine as a secretary, and that's barely enough to keep up the payments on the twin Ferraris we must have."

Interrupting her in mid sob, Monty said, "Hold on there, Steph. Gotta pay our bills. Time for a commercial."

Musing on Stephanie's problems as Monty waxed eloquent about a laxative, I silently agreed that a junior accountant's salary plus a secretary's salary didn't add up to even one Ferrari. On that subject, I was an expert, having many times turned down Todd's request for a Ferrari when he was a junior accountant and I was a secretary. Of course, since Aunt Gertrude's death three years ago, which allowed me to quit my job, we could buy a fleet of

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Ferraris, as Todd repeatedly points out; but I believe expensive cars invite carjackers.

"Why, I'd be afraid to stop at a red light in a car like that, Todd," I told him. "That's when carjackers smash the driver's window, unlock the doors, and jump inside."

"The odds of that happening are five million to one," he snapped, drawing on his unlimited stock of imaginary numbers.

Ignoring his math, I added, "And heaven knows what a carjacker would do to me once he got inside."

I shivered. Todd smiled.

Affectionately, I patted the dashboard of my solid Buick—Todd has one too—as Monty returned to the saga of Stephanie.

"So what I hear you saying, Stephie, is that your married lover's wife is downright cheap."

"Yes," agreed Stephanie, "and she's downright frumpy."

"Frumpy?" asked Monty. "I don't know 'frumpy.'"

"It's sort of an old-fashioned word that older people in their forties use."

"Older people in their forties!" echoed Monty in dismay. "How old are you, Buttercup?"

"Twenty-four," she answered and proceeded to define frumpy. "The frumpies are women who wear unstylish clothes like lime-green polyester pantsuits and carry plastic tote bags with daisies on them. And they still get their hair permed into retro curly styles."

"Horrors," sniggered Monty. "Dial nine-one-one for the fashion police."

"Exactly," said Stephanie. "And there's something else about her, too."

"Something more offensive than the retro hair?"

"Yes," breathed Stephanie.

"Goody. Tell Uncle Monty all."

A pause.

"Come now, Stephanie. You've taken a huge chunk out of our time so you owe me and our listeners big time."

"Okay," she sighed. "Here goes. She's so overweight her jewelry doesn't fit anymore."

"That's it?" shrieked Monty. "You make us think you've got a bombshell like a crime or an interesting perversion and then you give us that bit of non-titillating fluff! You're wasting our time. Sorry, listeners. As for you, Stephanie, we'll personally volunteer your name as a suspect if ever a woman in a lime-green polyester pantsuit is found murdered. Next caller, please."

Murdered! I shuddered. Why would Stephanie and her married lover want to murder a woman just for being frumpy, cheap, and unable to wear her jewelry anymore? Bonding with the maligned wife, I rubbed my wrist, which still bore the imprint of the tennis

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bracelet that no longer fit. Overflowing with empathy, I reached into my plastic tote bag to retrieve tissues to mop the tears that plopped onto my chartreuse slacks.

"Mother Nature should have equipped us with retractable windshield wipers for our eyelids," I murmured in solidarity with the woman who couldn't wear her tennis bracelet anymore.

Tennis bracelet! Who said anything about a tennis bracelet?

"You did," said that little inner voice that cuts into my interior monologues like an intrusive call-waiting signal.

Tires squealing, I made a U-turn into the opposite direction of Le Barbeque d'Andre. I had to get home to check our Christmas-card list, which would include the name of Todd's secretary. I had forgotten her name because Todd had stopped talking about the office during the past few months. In fact, he had stopped talking about anything during the past few months. The memories of silent meals forced me to pull over to the curb to tend to my tears. Had Todd been plotting to murder me as he stabbed at his seaweed salad?

When I was able to resume driving, I saw flashing lights in my rearview mirror, a signal to pull over. I turned off the ignition as a police officer tapped on my window. After checking my license and registration, he cited me for erratic driving.

"But officer," I sobbed, "my husband is going to kill me."

"Think about that the next time you're planning a U-turn and roaring up to a curb without signaling," he said, believing I was just exaggerating my husband's reaction to my ticket.

"No, I mean, he's really going to kill me. Him and his secretary—I think her name is Stephanie. Just ask Monty."

"Ma'am, in this job we hear a lot of far-fetched stories that are concocted to make us tear up tickets. Yours ranks right up there with the best. But here's the ticket and tell it to the judge. Take Monty along with you."

Tipping his cap, he added, "Have a nice day."

The image of his badge being ripped off his uniform by his superior after a woman in a lime-green pantsuit was found murdered sustained me during the ride home. Adding dialogue to this fantasy helped me even more.

Officer: *"But Captain, I thought she was making it up about her husband and Stephanie just to get out of the ticket.*

Captain: *It's not our job to make assumptions. You should have checked with Monty.*

Officer: *It will never happen again.*

Captain: *That's for sure. You're off the force.*

Officer: *Oh no!*

Captain: *Have a nice day.*

Shaking, I ran into the house and opened the top drawer in Todd's desk and studied the Christmas-card list. Beside the name

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Stephanie Nesbit he had written: "My secretary. Send to home address, not office."

So it was Todd's secretary who'd called Monty. Angrily, I shoved the list into the drawer and dislodged a photo under some writing paper. It was me, but a younger and very different me superimposed onto a card decorated with holly leaves. A Santa Claus hat perched jauntily on my unpermed hair, which caressed my shoulders. My slender arms hugged a stuffed Rudolph. The brightness of my smile could have nudged that reindeer out of the running for those foggy-night heroics.

When had I ever been that young, slender, and happy? Perhaps there was a date on the back of the card. I turned it over and read, "Christmas 1997. Thanks so much for Rudolph, Toddy-Woddy. Maybe next year I'll have something better to snuggle up to on Christmas Eve. Love, Stephanie."

Incredible! Toddy-Woddy had fallen in love with someone who could be a clone of me fourteen years ago, confirming a theory espoused by my friend Lisa that we follow a pattern of falling in love with the same physical types. "My dad," she told me, "married Dorothy Lamour three times. My mom and each of my stepmothers could have played in a 'Road' movie."

As for me, pre-Todd I fell in love with two Todd look-alikes—two tall, thin men with pinched lips who resembled the schoolmasters in English movies who were adept at caning, as Lisa described them.

This revelation that Stephanie was a years-ago Emily look-alike cheered me considerably. I smiled at Stephanie and patted Rudolph on the nose before sliding them back into the drawer. Humming, I removed the lime-green pantsuit and tossed it into the trash. No more Ms. Victim. No more silly worrying about getting murdered. Stephanie never said anything about murder; Monty did.

At that time I was a mere palimpsest of the original Emily whom Stephanie resembled, but I intended to resurface. After I changed into my workout clothes, I hopped into the car and turned on the car radio. "The solution, Monty, is simple," I said aloud as I headed toward the Down With Flab Health Club, avoiding any maneuvers that would reattract the heartless young officer. Raising my voice over the shrill chastisement Monty was leveling at a caller who had failed to deliver a salacious misery as promised to the call screener, I stated my game plan in two words: a makeover. Purposefully, I strode into the health club, like a pro intent on making a comeback.

"Why, Emily," gushed the receptionist, "it's so good to see you back. It's been four months, hasn't it, since you told us you had to go on a secret mission for the CIA and couldn't complete the aerobics course."

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She winked at someone standing behind me.

I turned and faced Lisa, who gleamed with good health. We squealed each other's names happily and hugged until I had to free myself from being impaled on her collarbones.

"You look wonderful," I said.

"And why not," she stated. "I not only count calories and work out every single day, but I change husbands every three-point-five years."

"But your first husband looked like Kevin Costner," I said. "How could you give him up?"

"Easily. Husbands two and three look like him too. Remember the look-alike pattern."

Losing my resolve, I burst into tears. "Todd is following the look-alike pattern, too," I sobbed. "He's in love with someone who looks like me."

Lisa frowned. "You mean he's in love with someone who's overwe— well, um, let's say, someone who doesn't work out nearly enough?"

"No, someone who looks like I did fourteen years ago."

"I see," she answered absently as she patted my shoulders and then held on to them to balance herself for a stretching exercise. After curving her left leg backward until it almost rested on her shoulder, she sighed, not from exertion, but from the strain of what she was about to say.

"Listen, Emily, let your look-alike have Todd. I never did understand what you saw in a man who looks like every actor who ever terrorized Oliver Twist in the orphanage."

"But I love him," I wailed.

"Oh, good grief," groaned the receptionist and Lisa in unison.

"Let me tell you my game plan," I begged. "I'm going to lose twenty-five pounds, have my hair styled to caress my shoulders, as they say in the shampoo ads, have my eyebrows waxed, learn about cosmetics, and buy a new wardrobe. In other words, I'm going to have a makeover. Then Todd will forget the sham Emily and love me, the real me, again. Will you help me, Lisa?"

"Okay," she said, "but not because I want to help you win back Todd, who looks like the time-study expert feared by all the widows in the workhouse. I'll participate in this makeover because it will make you healthier and help you to feel better about yourself. First stop, the treadmill. I hope you're up for it."

"Child's play," I laughed as I hopped aboard. After only a few minutes, I remembered that the treadmill used to figure prominently in prisons as an instrument of punishment. After five minutes, I believed I had atoned sufficiently for my crimes and begged Lisa to commute my sentence. Instead, she switched the machine

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to an elevated plane and I was no longer walking to nowhere, but climbing to nowhere.

Up, up Mount Everest I climb, bearing several bundles of supplies on my back, destined for the climbers stranded there who are waiting for me, Emily, to lead them back to safety. As I struggle upward, I hear singing, not the sounds of angels ready to bear me to paradise, but the infantile cooing of Stephanie echoing through the comfort of the base camp as she sings silly songs to Toddy-Woddy and Rudolph. My resolve strengthened, I reach the summit, accept the gratitude of the stranded, and tumble down the hill into the grasp of my own rescuer, Lisa, who hoists me off the machine.

"Good girl," she said before chipping at my resolve with, "ten minutes today, twenty tomorrow."

"Uh, listen, Lisa, I have a really important appointment tomorrow, with, uh, my decorator. Yes, that's it. We're going to redo the, um, laundry room."

"Cancel," she barked and steered me toward an exercise bike. For a few seconds, I was pleasantly reminded of the days when I rode leisurely in the park during my engagement to Todd, and I pedaled dreamily. Contentment, however, offends Lisa.

"Enough of this slow-pokiness," she pronounced as she turned the tension knob to its highest position. "Let's show some attitude!"

Hot, hot, terribly hot. Sweat pours down my forehead, into my eyes, onto my chin, but what else can I expect after volunteering to cycle up Mount St. Helens, which has entered into the early stages of eruption. Driblets of lava force me to cycle serpentine style to reach the injured eagle perched precariously on the rim of the caldera. When I reach the eagle and place him carefully in my knapsack, the crowd below cheers, except for the young officer in its midst who scribbles my name on ticket after ticket because I failed to signal my serpentine intentions. The crowd boos him soundly, and Monty turns to Stephanie and says, "Sorry, Buttercup, Emily has it all over you. She looks great in that lime-green spandex cycling outfit."

Fortified by those images, I managed to complete five miles before Lisa pointed to the racquetball court and mouthed, "Meet me there in five minutes." Grimacing, I slid off the machine. Apologizing to my limbs, I promised them only one more workout and entered the chamber of horrors where my body twisted and ducked but failed to elude the hard black ball that ricocheted off the walls and ceiling, pummeling me like vicious hailstones.

"You did good," Lisa said as she piggybacked me into the locker room and tossed me into the shower. "But I wish you were working out simply for the joy of well-being and not for that husband who looks like he'd derive his greatest pleasure from evicting peasants from their thatched-roof cottages. Now let's celebrate your first day back at Down With Flab with a really good dinner."

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She took me to the Vibrant Veggie, a health-food restaurant that championed the nutrients of its fare with alliterative blurbs on the menu like "our broccoli is too bashful to boast about its bountiful benefits so we'll do it . . ." and "our coquettish cauliflower can coax you into cavorting at a cotillion devoid of carnivorous crashers." After reading the anthropomorphic descriptions of each vegetable, I felt that eating them would be tantamount to feasting on friends. I settled for Tempestuous Tempeh, which the menu assured me unalliteratively would flamenco through my body and stomp vitamins into every cell.

At home, I supplemented my dinner with brown rice, water chestnuts, and eggplant, the meal that I had prepared for Todd. When he saw me ladle the food onto two plates, he said, "Why, Emily, you're not eating your usual fried and fatty poison. What's going on?"

"I thought I'd try eating like you, Todd. Actually, this is delicious," I lied.

"But I hope this doesn't mean that you've stopped eating desserts," he said, reaching under the table for a box from Bittermann's Bakery. "Black Forest cake, your favorite."

In an obvious effort to make amends for his cruel comments of the morning, he had bought me a calorie-packed gift, which did not fit into my game plan. After Todd excused himself from the table for his nightly walk, I dumped the cake into the trash can by the garage and carried the box back to the kitchen and put it on top of the refrigerator. When Todd returned, he went into the kitchen, then sprinted into the living room where I sat staring into space, too weary to push the power button to turn on the TV.

"Ah, I see you've eaten the whole cake, Emily. Well done. Good girl. If you'll excuse me now, I have to make a phone call."

Odd that he should be happy when he thought I had overindulged, but I supposed his guilt for being so insensitive that morning needed relief. Pleased with a penitent Todd, I snuggled deeper into the armchair and drifted off to sleep.

And had strange dreams, peopled by Todd cavorting merrily around the room with a slender woman who blew kisses at me and cried, "Farewell, Polyester Princess." Several times in the dream Todd danced over to me and lifted my wrist, holding it for a minute, dropping it, and saying, "Not yet." Apparently, he wanted me to join in the dance, but I couldn't wake up.

Someone wailing pitifully finally did awaken me. It wasn't the young woman who had disappeared and it wasn't Todd, who was slumped fully clothed on the sofa, snoring heavily and looking as if he had fallen asleep while keeping some kind of vigil. Daylight streamed into the room, helping me to orient myself and locate the source of the keening. Stiffly, I got up from the chair and

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limped to the window. Next to our garage, Mrs. Mitchell, my neighbor, was cradling Whiskers, her tabby, in her arms. Apparently, the poor creature had been hit by a car and tried to crawl home but made it only as far as our trash cans.

"Poor woman," I said, "we must send her a condolence card."

"You don't send a condolence card to the woman you've murdered," snarled Todd, rising from the sofa, rubbing his eyes.

"What a strange thing to say, Todd. You must be pulling out of a bad dream."

Looking as if he'd seen a ghost, he sank down on his knees and whispered, "Emily, it's you. I thought you were someone else."

"No, dear, it's me," I said, holding his shaking arm.

"I've got to shower," he growled.

Since hunger was making Todd grouchy, I rushed into the kitchen to pour out his Mega-Muesli and line up his twenty-seven vitamin pills. However, the infusion of all those nutrients did nothing to restore the minimum daily allowance of good humor he usually shows me when he leaves in the morning. In fact, he regarded me sulkily, making me wonder if I had forgotten to put out his pantothenic-acid tablets. Todd insists that he is homeostatically affected when he is pantothenically deprived.

The strange dreams of the evening, the death of my neighbor's cat, and Todd's grouchiness depressed me. When he left for work, I tossed my game plan into the brain bin that stores discarded resolutions and mixed a batch of pancakes. As they bubbled in the pan I thought of calling Down With Flab and telling the receptionist that I had been summoned by the CIA for yet another secret mission. A knock at the door kept me honest and rescued my game plan.

Jogging in place on the back porch, Lisa ordered me to join her. When she sniffed the pancakes, she trotted into the kitchen, switched off the stove, shoved a handful of Mega-Muesli in my mouth and—never missing a beat—pushed me out the door. Since I still wore my workout clothes from yesterday, I couldn't object. Totally repulsed by level ground, *La Belle Jogger sans Merci* sought out every steep incline in my neighborhood. Although Lisa ignored my pitiable huffing, a vicious-looking Doberman leaped a fence—not to attack me, but to lick my hand and nudge me up a hill.

"Thanks," I gasped, drawing strength from the animal's kindness and from the sight of an ambulance without flashing lights turning the corner, a vehicle that could surely handle a pickup.

"Over here," I bleated, while waving weakly.

An emergency medical technician who mistook my distress signal for a friendly wave rolled down his window and gave me the thumbs-up sign. "Keep up the good work, ma'am, and the most you'll ever need from us is an ace bandage for a sprain."

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Groaning, I soldiered on, jogging mindlessly, until through sweat-bathed eyes I saw a figure floating toward me. Lisa handed me bottled water and studied her sports watch, concluding that I had done two miles in forty minutes.

"You'll break that record tomorrow," she promised.

Tomorrow—beautiful torrential tomorrow. The tail end of a hurricane swatted our town with heavy rains and 45-mile-per-hour winds. Lisa was a no-show on my back porch but she did call later in the day to inform me that Down With Flab still had a roof, windows, and torture equipment intact, and there was no reason for me to stay home. So I went that day and every day for a month, at the end of which I had lost twelve pounds.

Of course, I didn't accomplish that feat through exercise alone. I became intimate with fruits, vegetables, fish, and lean meat. Like mostly everyone who has triumphed even for a short time over old habits, I felt vastly superior to anyone still indulging in no-no food. Whenever I passed Le Barbeque d'Andre, I sneered at those going in. In fact, I added Le Barbeque to my jogging route just to make customers feel bad when they saw me through the window. Many times I saw diners actually put down a helping of the Fries of France when I came into view.

Physically I felt terrific, but emotionally not so great. I had expected Todd to be delighted with my progress, but he continually tried to sabotage my efforts with goodies from Bittermann's Bakery. At breakfast one morning he tried to tempt me with huge cream-filled doughnuts that looked as if they had been injected with confectioner's steroids.

"Mmm, these are delicious, Emily," he said, after biting into one from the bottom of the box. "Try one. In fact, try two."

"No, thanks," I replied. "They'll slow me down. I can almost keep up with Lisa now."

Shoving the bakery box into the trash can, he muttered, "Why you want to go jogging with a woman who looks as if she could lead Amazons into battle, I'll never know. What ever happened to my soft, cuddly Emily?"

"Ask Monty," I said cryptically as I charged out the door, having no time to lavish on pouty Todd. Lisa had made an appointment for me that morning to be de-permed at the Hair Revival Salon, a shop that advertised "all your shampooing, styling, and coloring sins will be miraculously washed away by heavenly hands for a small donation of $125."

At the salon, I delivered myself into the hands of Miguel, whose hair was tied in a ponytail and whose dark eyes flashed at me when I entered like a toreador assuming control over a difficult beast. Thoroughly subdued, I sank into the chair at his station and he wordlessly studied my head. He wore a long white robe

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like the other stylists at Hair Revival, and I mentally whipped it off and dressed him in the satin bolero and tight-fitting pants that his handsome body deserved.

Miraculously, he transcended the mere examination of my head and peered inside it, capturing the theme of my fantasy. "Salvaging your hair," he snorted, "is like a challenge that would earn me two ears and a tail in the bullring. I must charge you one hundred and seventy-five dollars."

"Olé," I whispered. "I mean okay."

No bull had ever suffered as much as I. Miguel feinted and charged and jabbed at my head. Muttering words that sounded like "down curl, down curl," he slathered my hair with gel and pulled a metal comb through it. Scowling, he looked at my pained expression in the mirror and decided I could take more. Tossing the comb on the vanity, Miguel went manual. He pulled, he yanked, he stroked. And then he crooned. Yes, crooned.

"Sometimes I have to sing to relax the most stubborn ones," he explained, as I slid further down in the chair, charmed by his sudden sweetness.

At Down With Flab that afternoon, Lisa pronounced Miguel a genius. Critically surveying my head, she observed, "You're free of about one-fourth of those corkscrews. You're on your way to the Stephanie look, although why you want to resemble the paramour of a man who could pass for the chief lasher on the *Bounty,* I'll never know."

Todd's reaction to Miguel's skill was hardly enthusiastic. "What the hell did you do to your hair?" he bellowed.

"I'm getting de-permed. I'm going to have hair that caresses my shoulders, just like I had when we were first married."

"So I have to sit opposite someone with a hairdo like Bozo the Clown's wig until that happens," he snarled as he thrust a piece of lemon meringue pie at me.

"No, thanks, you eat it," I counter-snarled and left the table, sustained by the images starting to form in my head.

The time capsule opens and I find myself in Colonial Williamsburg. I follow the crowd to the town square where a squirming, squealing, fortyish man is being shoved into the stocks. "What's his crime?" I ask a mobcapped woman. She blushes as if too embarrassed to explain. Finally she sighs and whispers, "He mocked his wife's hair." My eyes widen in horror at that offense. A young boy offers bystanders something from a large basket. I take one and then join in with the crowd as we gleefully toss creamy pies at the captive target.

On my way to an evening aerobics class—I had begun a twice-a-day regime at Down With Flab—I passed the kitchen and shuddered at the sight of Todd shoveling globs of pie into his mouth,

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meringue whiskers dotting his cheeks. He demolished the dessert, except for the piece he had offered me, which rested on top of the trash can. This grotesque scene was replayed every night for two weeks as Todd's efforts at sabotaging my game plan escalated—shoo-fly pies, chocolate eclairs, cherry cobblers, apple turnovers—all offered to me, refused, and the proffered delicacy consigned to the garbage while Todd consumed the rest.

En route to the Hair Revival Salon for my third session with Miguel and my first with Colette, the cosmetician, I met Lisa, who was power-walking with her third husband—who did look like Kevin Costner, but only as the actor might look after three days of nonstop filming. As he puffed along beside her, I knew his days as a Lisa-spouse were numbered. Waving with one of the ten-pound weights she carried, Lisa shouted, "Hey, I had a Todd sighting today. He was sitting at the counter of the Dignified Doughnut. He's gotten so pudgy he looks as if he's been stealing the gruel from Oliver Twist's tablemates. He's giving himself a makeover, but in the wrong direction."

She was right about Todd, who had easily picked up the twelve pounds that I had dropped. What a contrast to slender, muscular Miguel, who waved the client's protective cape at me teasingly before I sat down!

"Today's the day, *Señora,* that I, Miguel, triumph over the last line of resistance. Bid farewell to your curly locks."

"Adios," I said as he whisked out his shears and snipped off the last layer of corkscrews. After they fell, he stamped on them with scorn and the entire staff applauded. Then he stroked my hair gently with a brush and sang quietly to it until the strands, like me, relaxed. My hair curved obediently onto my shoulders.

"You're a genius, Miguel," I murmured, trying to extend the moment by soliciting his modest denial.

"Yes. Because I am Miguel, the most skilled hair-tamer in the business. And now I must tend to my public. I have three clients waiting for a follow-up to ensure the docility of their locks."

Lowering his voice, he leaned over and kissed my hand, "But none, *Señora,* is as exciting for Miguel as you. You are my masterpiece."

"Oh, Miguel," I sighed as he led me to the station of Colette, the cosmetician, "can I see you again?"

"Every three weeks," he answered, handing me a business card with his hours on it.

Since Colette hadn't finished with another customer, I stared at the card, embossed with a jeweled comb, and let that image do its work.

I am Rosalita, a poor but beautiful flamenco dancer at the Café Olé in Barcelona. My only valuable possession is a jeweled comb given to me by my grandmother to hold my luxurious hair in place as I dance.

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One evening, a rough crowd enters the café and makes crude comments to me. The worst offender is a pudgy fortyish man who looks as if he would be happiest presiding at an Inquisition. He grabs me and my comb falls off. When my hair spills to my shoulders, he ties it back with a diamond tennis bracelet. He is about to carry me off when Miguel, the bravest matador in Spain, immobilizes him with a glance from his dark, flashing eyes. "Stay away from Rosalita," he orders as he, Miguel, replaces the comb in my hair.

"Hi, I'm Colette," announced a wispy voice.

I opened my eyes, clapped my hands, and pounded a few flamenco steps on the floor. "And I am Rosalita."

Flustered, the petite young woman dropped a tray of lip gloss.

I apologized to her all through my cucumber facial and eyebrow wax. After generously tipping her and buying the entire line of Cleopatra's Secret makeup, I hurried to my car to give myself a good talking-to.

"Come back to reality, Emily," I hissed at the new face that sheepishly regarded me in the rearview mirror. "You're not a flamenco dancer and you're about the fiftieth of Miguel's masterpieces. And you're being shamefully disloyal to Todd in your fantasies. The whole purpose of this game plan was to win him back. Shape up and keep focused.

"And repeat after me, 'I love Todd.'"

"I love Todd."

"Louder."

"I love Todd."

"Once more."

Before I could follow that order, I saw the young police officer who had ticketed me standing next to the car, regarding me quizzically. I waved and carefully pulled away from the curb before he could cite me for talking to myself in a motor vehicle.

At home, Todd was mixing a batch of brownies. He looked so cute with dollops of batter speckled across his nose and dangling from his left ear that I tiptoed up and hugged him. Startled, he dropped a vial of something white, confectioner's sugar, I supposed, onto the kitchen floor.

"For Pete's sake, Emily, look what you made me do. I was going to surprise you with these, but you made me drop this special ingredient."

I apologized all through the cleanup, which taxed him severely. No longer able to bend over easily because of the Bittermann's Bakery deposits at his waistline, he had to sit on the floor to do the job. When he was finished, I helped him up and handed him a cup of Rudy's root 'n bark tea as a peace offering.

Instead of berating me for causing the mess, he frowned as he

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sipped and finally said, "You're starting to remind me of somebody. If only your clothes were different, I might be able to say who it is."

Stephanie, the ersatz me, that's who! I thought giddily, patting my subdued hair and hugging my shrinking body. To complete the transformation, all I had to do was to keep up with my regimen for a few more weeks and buy a Stephanie wardrobe. After Todd toddled off for his nap, I studied her photo on the Christmas card to see what she wore, but the red-nosed reindeer covered her blouse except for its short sleeves. Why couldn't Monty Malaise, the radio-talk-show host, have inquired about her style of dress after she mocked my lime-green polyester pantsuit, which was now gracing a landfill?

Discouraged, I almost sought solace from the box of Godiva chocolates Todd had placed on the table beside my chair in the living room, but my conscience, whom I dubbed Lisa, protested mightily. In a few minutes, virtue rewarded me, and I devised a plan. I would go to Todd's building at lunchtime and observe Stephanie in the cafeteria and learn her style—unless she carried a big stuffed animal around all the time, which I wouldn't put past someone who called my husband Toddy-Woddy.

Of course, I needed a disguise and, of course, I solicited Lisa's help. "So you want me to come up with a getup that will allow you to spy on your husband's mistress at lunch," she said in her usual tactful way. Seizing a jump rope, she displayed footwork that would have impressed even Evander Holyfield.

"I've got the answer," she announced. "Rope-work always stimulates my brain."

After showering, she led me to Foster's Department Store, first to housewares and then to the uniform department. Loaded down with purchases, I followed her to Beck's Pharmacy, where she tried reading glasses on me and settled for a half-lens pair. At Wilma's Wig Emporium, she selected a curly auburn number.

The next day, outfitted in a blue uniform on the pocket of which Lisa had stitched "Ace Cleaning Service," I nervously approached the security guard at Beebe, Beebe, Carruthers, and Beebe Accounting.

"Nora from Ace Cleaning," I said bravely, then cringed. Obviously moonlighting—or sunlighting, since it was daytime—the young officer who had ticketed me wore a Stan's Security Service uniform. Fearful that he'd remember me in spite of the glasses and wig and recall the name Emily, not Nora, on my driver's license, I tried to push past him.

"Just a minute. Let me see your license and registration; I mean, let me see some ID."

I pointed to the stitching on my uniform.

"That won't do," he responded.

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"Call my boss," I said and gave him Lisa's number.

He removed his cell phone and dialed.

"Ace Cleaning Service," she said brightly.

Although assured by Lisa of my credentials—she told him I was the best mopper in the business—he scratched his head as if coaxing a memory out of hiding. To give him something else to think about, I stumbled forward and tapped his forehead soundly with the handle of my mop.

"Have a nice day," I said as I swept past him, seemingly oblivious to his language, which surely violated some township ordinance on public behavior. At a post next to the salad bar, for I was sure Stephanie feasted on endives and cucumbers, I picked up and dropped a wilted piece of lettuce several times before pretending to mount a mop-attack on the smudge on the floor.

When I looked up, I beheld Stephanie—she who had mocked my color choice to Monty—resplendent in a lime-green leather miniskirt topped by a lime-green leather vest. For some reason, however, the color did not make her look frumpy. Fellow workers, men, cast admiring glances at her as she sashayed to the dessert bar to rendezvous with Todd.

Although I had gotten a sense of Stephanie's fashion style and could have left a cryptic "mission accomplished" message on Lisa's answering machine, my curiosity to hear them conversing as a couple propelled me to a post near their table. Mopping my way across the room, I stopped at a small spill near them and eradicated it over and over, while furtively glancing at the lovers.

Shaking her finger, Stephanie scolded, "Toddy-Woddy, you're getting gross. Must you eat three pieces of banana cream pie and four dishes of butterscotch pudding for lunch?"

"Yes, I must," he shot back. "This business of trying to . . . "

I moved closer.

" . . . eliminate the problem . . ."

Chomp, slurp, chomp, slurp.

" . . . is really stressful. . . ."

Not exactly a romantic conversation. Most likely, Todd was trying to eliminate a work-related accounting problem. To contain my anger at seeing them together and learning that Todd shared problems with her and not me, I created my own scenario.

I am Agent 008, the most ingenious operative in the bureau. I have been assigned to eavesdrop on two people who have betrayed a trust. Although they are speaking in an intricate code, I am able to decipher it through my mop which has been equipped by our computer people with artificial intelligence. Their code appears to be based on food. The man says, "I've tried everything she loves to eat—Bittermann's Bakery's whole repertoire and Godiva chocolates."

Suddenly, I realize I never activated the Power button on the

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mop and what I am hearing is not code.

"She won't bite," he sighed. "Literally, she won't bite into anything I put in front of her. Lisa the Amazon has brainwashed her into eating health food."

"Keep trying," Stephanie urged. "She's bound to give in soon."

"It better be soon," Todd growled, "I'm running low on the poi—Ouch!"

Stephanie administered a swift kick to his shin. "Oh, the poi, yes, the poi, the Hawaiian food made from the taro root. I can't wait to try it. And after you've solved the problem, we'll have plenty of resources to dine on poi right on Maui."

The Bureau has also equipped the mop with small darts of curare poison, but it wouldn't be wise to use them in this crowded place, especially since my hand is shaking and they might hit the wrong target. The lecture given by Z, the chief, advised on subtle methods of attack, and one is already forming in my mind.

Through blurred vision, I watched Stephanie get up from her seat, lean over to pick up a shopping bag, and surreptitiously blow a kiss to Todd. That gesture cleared my vision, allowing me to read the logo on the shopping bag, and firmed my resolve to carry out a new game plan—as did the sight of Todd waddling over to the dessert bar for refills.

On my way home, I stopped at Bo's Boutique, the shop name printed on Stephanie's bag. Although not yet svelte, I was able to be shrink-wrapped into a lime-green leather miniskirt and vest, most likely two sizes larger than Stephanie's identical outfit. To complete the morph into Stephanie, I bought a pair of three-inch wedgies. Tottering out of the store, I checked my reflection in Bo's window and decided at fast glance, which is all my neighbor would give to the visitor at my home, that I could pass as my husband's lover.

At home, I called Todd and left a message on his voice mail.

"Todd, could you please bring home a pizza for dinner? I am totally famished and tofu will not satisfy me tonight. Thanks so much."

The phone rang shortly after. "Sure, honey," gushed Todd, "I'd be glad to bring home a pizza. I've been so worried about you losing all that weight that I've been stuffing myself. Compensatory eating, I believe it must be. And I'll get pepperoni topping, your favorite. I'll be home bearing Georgio's pizza at five-thirty. Love ya."

Love ya—right. He was probably looking at Stephanie when he said that. The two of them were surely doing a polka around the office until she advised him that the poison vial might spill out of his pocket.

At 5:15, I slipped my sweatsuit over the lime-green outfit and gratefully exchanged the wedgies for sneakers. To look more convincing when I left the house after the pizza dinner, I had been practicing walking in them for two hours. At exactly 5:30, Todd

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bounded in the door, holding the pizza box aloft like a waiter, and pulled my chair out for me. He set the box on the table, carefully arranging it so that "org" in Georgio was directly in front of me. Beneath those innocent letters, I knew, lurked the poisoned pizza.

Todd bowed and said, "Madame, zis ees ze finest entrée from Georgio's. I personally will ladle out ze first slice for you onto our finest china."

As he turned to get a plate from the cabinet, I gave the box a quarter-turn so that the designated first piece would not face me. Unaware that the letters "org" now faced him, Todd opened the box and used the pizza cutter to remove the slice directly in front of me. I accepted it with a smile. He sat down on the chair to my left and started eating a piece topped with pepperoni, garnished with specks of white powder. He was so busy watching me that he didn't even glance at his piece of pizza.

I nibbled.

He gagged, clutched his throat, and slid off the chair.

I took off the sweatsuit, retrieved the wedgies, put on a pair of gloves, and headed out the door. When I saw Mrs. Mitchell, my next-door neighbor, watering her flowers, I scrunched low, but not too low, next to a hedge, and held my gloved hand next to my face so she'd be sure to see it. Since she didn't say hello, I assumed she didn't recognize me, but she surely would remember the Stephanie outfit and shoes if she peeked around the hedge. And if she didn't, she'd definitely remember the hairdo and gloved hand (which explained the lack of Stephanie's prints in the house) when questioned by the police.

Painfully, I hobbled around to the other side of the house, where we had no neighbors, and went in through the basement door. In the living room, I dialed the radio show *Misery Loves Company.* It must have been a slow day for misery because I had only a few minutes to wait before Monty, the host, came on the line.

"*Misery Loves Company.* Monty Malaise speaking."

"Monty, this is Stephanie. Remember me?"

"Sure, you're the caller whose lover won't divorce his wife. You said she was thumpy or something."

"Frumpy."

"So anything new on the frumpy front? Got some better stuff for Monty today, other than the fact that his wife wears unfashionable clothes? Has your misery index risen to the lascivious levels we love?"

"It sure has," I sobbed. "I've gotten so upset with my boyfriend for not leaving her that I played a terrible game with him today."

"Goody," said Monty brightly. "Stay with us, listeners. Stephanie might be bringing us some lurid stuff today. What kind of game?"

"Well, I'll call it Pizza Roulette, although he wasn't aware we

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were playing it. I poisoned one slice of pizza and spun it in front of him. He took it and died."

"Good grief, woman, are you crazy?"

"No, just miserable, so that's why I called. I had to get it off my chest. Thanks for your time, Monty."

"Hold on now, hold on," he yelled.

I hung up and turned on the radio.

"Don't worry, listeners," Monty assured his audience. "We'll get her; we have Caller ID."

I smiled. Caller ID would bring the police to my house, but I would be long gone, once more using the basement door. Mrs. Mitchell would fill the police in on Todd's lime-green killer, who obviously forgot about Caller ID. At least, that's what the prosecutor would claim at her trial. I peeled off the mini outfit and stuffed it in my duffel bag, along with the torturous shoes. I wrapped myself in a terry-cloth towel and put my sweatsuit over it before going to my car, which was parked around the block.

At Down With Flab, I entered through the back door and shoved the sweatsuit and duffel bag into a locker far from anyone else in the room before sauntering into the sauna, which fortunately was empty. I stayed only a few minutes, splashed water on my face to simulate sweat, and returned to the locker room, pretending to be overcooked. Three witnesses could confirm my presence at the health club at the approximate time of Todd's death.

It was imperative that I not skip my workout. I had to confess my transgression to Lisa when she came in. After all, I had eaten almost a whole piece of pizza that day and needed her absolution. Besides, I had to look good for the trial.

At the sensational trial of Stephanie Nesbit for the murder of my husband, I, the widow, am tastefully outfitted in a size 6 black dress and am wearing a small pillbox hat with an eye-level veil. I enter the courtroom on the arm of my chief comforter, Miguel. Dabbing at tears, I take the stand and identify the defendant—a woman sallow from lack of sunlight and pudgy from prison food, wearing an unstylish print dress—as the jilted lover of my husband. "Stephanie Nesbit killed Todd because he wouldn't leave his wife," thunders the prosecutor.

"Why would he ever leave beautiful Emily," stage-whispers a male spectator, "for someone like Stephanie. She's so, she's so . . ."

"Frumpy?" offers the woman beside him.

"Yes, frumpy, that's the word. Frumpy." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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Art by Mark Evans

CHOU'S GAMBIT

by Jeremiah Healy

It was one of those sunny late-April Mondays that actually made you believe winter had finally released its grip on Boston. Walking at a leisurely pace from my apartment in Back Bay to my office on Tremont Street, I'd worn only a business suit. However, the older man standing in the corridor next to my door evidently didn't share my view of the weather.

He wore a cotton turtleneck under a V-neck sweater and a light, loose-waisted parka. The colors were pastels you'd associate with Florida, the man's deep, leathery tan complementing the image. His hair showed equal amounts of brown and gray, the eyes bright and sharp. I put his age around seventy-five, depending on whether the tan was hiding or adding a couple of years. About five ten and stocky, he turned to the door and pointed at "John Francis Cuddy, Confidential Investigations" stenciled on the pebbled glass.

"You're Mr. Cuddy?"

A slight accent, German or Polish. "That's right."

"Henry Silverberg." Instead of shaking hands, he looked down at his wristwatch. "Nine-fifteen."

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"I'll take your word for it."

"I've been waiting here already twenty minutes."

"If you'd let me know you were coming, I'd have arrived earlier."

Silverberg said, "When I got here, I knocked, but your secretary didn't answer."

"I don't have a secretary." I put my key in the lock and turned the tumbler, swinging the door wide for him.

"What, nobody opens up for you?"

"Uh-unh."

"In my practice, I always had a receptionist, welcome the patients." We entered the office, me going behind the desk, Silverberg moving toward one of the two client chairs in front of it. "A lot of people, they tell me, 'Henry, you're a dentist, you don't need a receptionist,' but I liked the way it made the first-timers feel comfortable, coming to see me."

"Can I take your coat?"

"No, thanks. I just got back from Lauderdale—I'm down there December till last week, the Tennis Club condominiums—and after five months in that sunshine, this today still seems kind of cold to me."

"Dr. Silverberg—"

"Not 'Doctor' anymore. Somebody even your age calls me 'Doctor' or 'Mister,' it makes me feel old, and believe me, seventy-nine is already old enough to feel."

"So, 'Henry,' then?"

"And 'John,' that's all right with you."

"Fine." As we both sat down, I brought a legal pad and pencil to the center of my desk. "What can I do for you?"

Silverberg suddenly looked less comfortable than his former patients probably were with the receptionist. "I got a problem."

"Involving?"

"This friend of mine, Chou."

"Chew?"

"C-H-O-U. Chinese gentleman I play chess with in Brookline."

The town just west of Boston. "He lives there?"

Silverberg seemed confused. "What?"

"Mr. Chou lives in Brookline?"

"Oh, no. I live there, when I'm not in Florida. Chou—and it's

John Francis Cuddy, Jeremiah Healy's series P.I., first saw print in the novel *Blunt Darts* in 1984. Like most of the Cuddy mysteries, this one deals with a controversial issue of law and morality. Readers who enjoy it may want to look for Mr. Healy's new novel *Spiral* (Aug. '99/ Pocket Books) or the previous book, *The Only Good Lawyer,* which is currently nominated for the PWA Shamus Award. ¶

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just that, no 'Mister' for him, either—he's the one first gave me that line about feeling old enough already."

Okay. "And Chou lives . . . ?"

"Chinatown, above his convenience store, seven blocks from where we're sitting in this office."

"Seven."

Silverberg now looked a little sheepish. "I measured it off."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted a private detective close enough to him to see what was what, and fast."

"Henry, maybe if you told me what the problem is?"

"You're right." A decisive nod. "I don't think I need the coat now."

I started to rise, but Silverberg waved me down, easily shrugging out of his parka without getting up himself. "This is the beauty of playing tennis, John. Keeps the old body fit, just like chess does for the mind." Laying the parka over his knees, he fixed me with the bright eyes. "Let me give you some background first, so you'll understand the problem, that's all right with you."

I set my pencil on the desk. "Whatever's easiest."

Silverberg's face said it wasn't going to be easy at all. "I come to this country from Germany, nineteen thirty-four. The 'government' they had in those days explains that, but my brother didn't believe things were going to get so bad. Jacob was two years older, already in his business, so he decided to stay. My leaving was hard—and not just because of leaving him. America had quotas then on Jews. Oh, Roosevelt and everybody else would deny it, they were still alive to argue the point, but the real rules weren't so different from today."

"Today?"

"The new immigration stuff. We hear a lot about it down in Lauderdale, account of all the Latinos working there. Now these great United States aren't going to take anybody from somewhere else hasn't got a 'sponsor' here who already makes twenty thousand a year, because Washington's afraid all these new immigrants are going to sign up for welfare. Twenty thousand, that would have bought a mansion when I come over in 'thirty-four."

"Henry—"

Another wave. "No, no. You're right. I'm getting off the point. Only let me finish the background, so you'll know."

"Go ahead."

"All right, so where . . . Jacob, right. Well, I come to America, and Jacob goes to Auschwitz, but I don't even know that for sure until after the war, when I try to get him traced. And that's the end of that."

Silverberg cleared his throat. Over fifty years, and you could still sense the pain.

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"So, I'm here, and I work my way through college and dental school. My practice prospers to the point I don't need it anymore. After I retire, though—you married, John?"

I thought of Beth, lying on her hillside in South Boston. "Widower."

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry." Silverberg shook his head. "But maybe you'll know what I mean, then. Myself, I never married, and after I retire, I realize I'm pretty lonely with no wife. You see, I miss the patients. And the problems in their mouths they'd bring me to fix. The tennis is fine for the body, like I said, but I'm looking for something to do with my mind, and I come back to what Jacob taught me in Germany but never had time for while I was a dentist."

"Chess."

"On the button. There's this park where I play in Brookline, the boards are engraved on concrete tabletops, with little chair-benches for the players to sit. All kinds of people, which makes it different. And good intellects, too, which makes it challenging." Silverberg cocked his head. "You play, John?"

"No."

"Pity. You should learn. We have younger ones, too. They're on their lunch breaks, so they play speed chess, just five minutes per player, ten minutes for the whole game. But Chou and me, we like to . . . linger over our moves, the way my brother and me used to back in Germany. Jacob was the one who told me about the great Jewish champions, like William Steinitz and Emanuel Lasker. Later we had Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer, but Steinitz and Lasker, together they were international champions for fifty-five years in a row. Can you imagine?"

"Henry—"

"Chou even plays like Jacob. Loves the gambits."

"Gambits?"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot you don't know the game. The beginning in chess is called the 'opening.' Me, I've always liked the 'Ruy Lopez,' which is named after this Spanish monk. There are all kinds of defenses, too. The French, the Sicilian. But Chou goes for the gambits, like the Bishop's or even the King's, where you risk sacrificing a minor piece to gain a positional advantage for the others on the board."

"Does your problem with Chou come from the chess games?"

The uncomfortable look again. "Not exactly."

"Then what is it?"

Silverberg brought a hand to his face, using the thumb and index finger to massage his eyes at the nose. "I think somebody's killed him."

Uh-oh. "In that case, you should be talking to the police, Henry, not a private—"

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"No." The hand came down abruptly. "No, John. I take this story to the cops, they're going to say all the right things, but they're going to think, 'senile old buzzard, fried his brains in the sun too long.'"

"What story?"

"What . . . oh, right. Well, last week, like I said, I get back from Florida, and Tuesday the weather's nice enough—like today—the players are in the park, at the chess tables. So I go over there, only no Chou. Now, you have to understand, John. Chou loves his chess—come over from his store two days a week to play, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Like clockwork."

"But you haven't been in the park since December, right?"

"Right, only it's been the same every year for the last three, ever since I met Chou there the first time. Once, when he was sick, he even called me, let me know he couldn't make it. You see, we're a lot alike, Chou and me. I had a brother in the old country, same for him. We both come to this country with nothing and got citizenship. Each of us our own business, our love of chess." Another wave of the hand. "Oh, there were differences, sure. I never married; Chou married late. His wife died way before I met him, but they had two kids first. In college now, Lily and Peter. Themselves, they never came to the park, but Chou gave me their picture once."

Silverberg dug into a pocket of the parka and produced a couple of photos. One was a posed portrait shot of two children with Asian features, maybe twelve and fourteen, the girl younger, the boy older. The other photo was a candid, showing Silverberg and an Asian man smiling at the camera from an outdoor chess table. A tattered baseball cap shadowed most of the Asian man's face as he reached a right hand to move one of the chess pieces, a sign behind him reading, TOWN OF BROOKLINE, CHESS HERE FOR ALL.

Silverberg said, "That's Chou with me, there."

"How old is he, Henry?"

"Sixty-four when that picture was taken, last October."

I handed the photos back to him. "Why do you think your friend is dead?"

"Not just dead, John. Killed."

"Killed, then."

A deep sigh. "When Chou wasn't at the park last Tuesday, I asked some of the other regulars. They said they hadn't seen him since this one nice day during the January thaw, which worried me. I mean, even with the winter and all up here, there's some good weather, right?"

"Right."

Silverberg darkened. "When he wasn't there Thursday, I couldn't sleep that night. Well, it was either go to the public library and read through three months of death notices, or go to his convenience store and try to see what was what. So, last Fri-

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day, I went over to Chinatown."

That sounded wrong. "Why not just call him?"

Sheepish again. "I didn't know his number."

"What?"

Uncomfortable now, waving at me. "I know, I know. It sounds stupid to you; imagine how it would sound to the cops. But even after three years seeing him twice a week when I wasn't in Florida, I never had reason to call the man. When I looked last Thursday in the White Pages, there were fifty, a hundred people last name 'Chou,' and I didn't even know the name of his store."

"Henry—"

"No." He held up a palm in the "stop" sign, then dropped it. "I'm sorry, John. I don't mean to be rude. You see, Chou always just referred to his business as 'my store,' and we were only 'chess' friends, not 'social' ones. Understand?"

"I'm not sure."

"All right, let me put it this way." Silverberg took a breath. "I'm a rich old dentist. Chou, from the way he dressed and all, didn't have two nickels to rub together. In Lauderdale, it's like that, too. You have tennis friends, the ones you play with because they're your ability level, and then social friends, who have the same interests in the theater or concerts and the means to enjoy them. See now?"

I thought so. "You've never really met Chou outside the chess park."

"On the button."

"Then how did you find his store last Friday?"

"Chou told me it was in Chinatown, between a Korean restaurant and a pet shop. So I walked the streets there till I found the right block."

Silverberg grew solemn. "Well, I go in the store, and there's his daughter behind the counter—oh, she'd changed some from that picture I showed you, but it was her, no question in my mind. She was standing with an older gentleman—Chinese, too—who seemed kind of . . . disabled, like you see stroke victims? So, he's smiling a little goofy, counting out change from the cash register real slow for this woman who's just buying a bottle of spring water. After the woman leaves, I walk up to the counter."

Silverberg shifted in his chair. "I say to Chou's daughter, 'I'd like to see your father.' She says to me, 'This is my father'—pointing to the older gentleman—'but he has suffered a stroke.' And I look at him and say, 'What?' And she says, 'He cannot talk. I told you, he has suffered a stroke.' So I look from her to him again, John, and you know what I say next?"

I thought I did. "'This man's not Chou.'"

"On the button. She tells me he is, and I tell her he isn't. And I

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have to get out of there. Already, I can't stand even to be in the store." Silverberg came forward in his chair. "John, I won't pretend to you that I'm some kind of expert on Chinese faces, and except for being older, this guy did resemble Chou. But you don't sit across from a man over a chessboard for three years without noticing things. A mole, the creases by the eyes. And for me, his teeth."

"His teeth?"

"I was a dentist, remember? This goofy-smiling older gentleman the daughter's trying to pass off had his own teeth, and they weren't Chou's."

I watched Silverberg. I didn't think him crazy, but his story certainly was, and no police detective with file cabinets full of obvious crimes would have listened long enough to separate the man from the tale.

"What do you want me to do, Henry?"

Silverberg worked his hands a little on top of the parka. "All weekend, I been thinking how I always felt bad about Jacob. I couldn't do anything to stop what the Nazis did to him, except trace him after he was gone. I told you Chou reminded me of Jacob, right?"

"Because of the way he plays chess."

The retired dentist in the pastel clothes nodded, then straightened in his chair. "John, I want you to do for Chou what I did for my brother. I want you to find out what's really happened to him."

I told Henry Silverberg that if he'd give me the address of the convenience store, I'd start right after lunch.

Carrying the white, waxy bag in one hand and a camp stool in the other, I made my way up to her row. When I reached the right headstone, I opened the stool's legs until they formed an X, then sat with the bag on my lap. Below us, a few hardy souls sailed across the harbor, the air having to be at least twenty degrees colder on the water. I took out the roast-beef sub first, followed by the Dr Pepper, and finally the tin-foiled two ounces of potato chips.

Her voice said, *Irish health food.*

I looked down at the lettering chiseled into the marble. ELIZABETH MARY DEVLIN CUDDY. "I haven't learned much over the years about nutrition, Beth."

So long as you've learned about other things.

"Like living without you?"

No answer for that one.

I said, "A man came to me this morning about an odd case."

Odd in what sense, John?

Summarizing Henry Silverberg's story for Beth didn't make it seem any more likely.

After I finished, there was a pause before, *What are you going to do?*

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"Silverberg already asked around at the chess park, and his visiting the convenience store probably blows any chance of surprise there."

Agreed.

"So, I thought I'd try a flanking attack."

It kind of pleased me that Beth took a minute to figure that out. Of course, after you're alone long enough, you learn how to exist on small pleasures.

As I walked into Chinatown, the streets narrowed and the air widened, the tang of exotic spices filling every breath I took. A garbage truck was making the rounds of the back alleys and crowded sidewalks, its rear hoist lifting trash that somehow seemed more basic than what I saw in the dumpster behind my own building. Boxes of cardboard or wood slats, with scant remains of vegetables and fruit in them. Not much wasted paper, either, even though there were more people in business suits than anywhere else in the city but the financial district. A couple of festive banners arced overhead, many of the store signs displaying both English lettering and Asian characters.

I say "Asian," because the area—lying east of Washington Street and west of Atlantic Ave—that everybody still nicknames "Chinatown" should now more accurately be designated "Asiantown." A lot of folks from Mao's old mainland call the neighborhood home, but Thai, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and so on, all struggle there for a decent slice of the American pie.

I saw a modest marquee for the Korean restaurant first. I figured to start with it and then skip over the convenience store to the other flanking business, the pet shop.

A slim, middle-aged Asian man in a cuff-linked shirt and conservative tie met me at the door of the restaurant. Maybe twenty small tables were arrayed behind him, only three of them still occupied by dawdling customers. Smiling with bad teeth that included a pair of gold canines in the top row, the slim man said, "One for lunch?"

I stepped inside and slightly past him. "Thanks, but I've already eaten."

The smile faded. "What you want, then?"

I thought there might be greater cooperation if he thought I was official rather than private, so I didn't show him any ID. Instead, gesturing with my right hand, I said, "I'd like to ask you some questions about the man who owns the business next door."

The smile seemed not just to be gone, but running hard away from him. "Chou is sick. Old, have bad stroke." A respectful mimicking of a right arm that hangs uselessly at the side of the body.

"Someone who knows him is worried about him."

"His children take care for him. No one should worry."

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"Maybe if—"

"I am busy. Very busy. Cannot talk now."

But when the slim man turned from me and walked back into the restaurant, he passed all the tables and went through a door that looked more office than kitchen.

I crossed the street diagonally away from the convenience store and used the opposite sidewalk, looking into the businesses there rather than the eventual target. After I was far enough along, I recrossed the street diagonally again so as to come up on the pet-shop fairly blindly.

No one met me at the threshold, but a tiny woman who could have been Laotian stood behind the front counter. She wore a scarf around her hair and was just returning a telephone receiver to its cradle on the wall behind her. Beyond the front counter were stacked aquaria with fish of all hues, the fins of all filigrees. Lizards the size of river rats lay inert on gravel behind glass walls while large flamboyant birds that I didn't think were parrots did a trapeze act in their cylindrical wire-mesh chimney.

As soon as the tiny woman looked up at me, she frowned. "Yes?"

Thinking of the slim man in the restaurant, I tipped my head toward the telephone. "Let me guess. You don't think I'm interested in the iguanas today."

"What you want here?" came next, the voice a little more shrill.

"I want to know what you can tell me about the man who owns the convenience store," this time gesturing with my left hand.

"Chou good man, but he very sick. Bad stroke." She let her right arm flop to its side.

"I see."

"His children take care of him, good care."

"Other than that, nothing is wrong?"

"Nothing. You go now."

I decided to see if I could be in Chou's store before the pet shop lady could finish calling, too.

There was no name in the small window, but it did display samples of the merchandise. Wheat crackers and radio batteries, oranges and facial tissues. When I came through the door, an Asian woman, perhaps in her late teens, and an older Asian man were behind the cash register. The woman let her black hair fall onto the shoulders of a green blouse; the man wore a threadbare flannel shirt and was just setting down a closed pocket knife with his left hand, the right dangling loosely at his side. Even if I'd brought Henry Silverberg's photos with me, I'm not sure I could have confirmed the man as being—or not being—the one depicted at the chess park, but I felt pretty confident the woman

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was a later version of the daughter in the portrait shot.

With a brave smile, she said, "You have an idea what you want?"

Unlike the people in the restaurant and pet shop, no accent, except for a little dash of Boston making the "a" in "idea" an "er" sound.

"Is this Mr. Chou?"

The woman nodded, and the older man followed her lead.

I said, "A friend of his is very concerned about him."

She kept smiling. "I'm his daughter, Lily. Could I see some identification, please?"

I took out the holder with the laminated card and opened it for her.

Lily Chou said, "You're a private investigator?"

"That's right."

Another nod. "Then we have nothing to say to you." She closed the holder and passed it back to me. "Please leave."

"If you don't talk to me here, we may all end up having a conversation with the police."

The brave smile never faltered. "I don't think so. My father is old and sick." She turned to him. "He has suffered—"

"—a very bad stroke, I know. How about the name of his doctor?"

"That's none of your business. Now please leave before I'm the one to call the police."

It was their store, and I had no right to stay, but I also had the feeling Henry Silverberg would be disappointed in me.

Or maybe not.

I noticed the tail two blocks away, on Washington Street, where the pedestrian traffic begins to thin out before reaching the large stores that constitute Downtown Crossing. A twentyish Asian guy, he was dressed in a crewneck sweater and baggy jeans. When I turned casually at a corner, lolling my head as though loosening a crick in my neck, he stopped to read thoroughly the posted menu of a coffee shop. At the next corner, he was still behind me, amateurish enough that I caught him staring in my direction when he didn't realize I could see him in a window's reflection.

Or recognize him, for that matter. From the portrait shot with his sister.

It wasn't hard to turn Peter Chou. I just popped into Filene's at the Summer Street entrance and took the up escalator. From the next level, I could watch him, walking first slowly, then quickly around the ground floor, looking for me. Eventually he stopped, shoving his hands into the side pockets of his jeans and going back out the same door we'd both used.

I got on the down escalator and followed, even though I was pretty sure where the trail would lead.

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From the corner of his father's block, I saw Peter Chou go in the front door of the convenience store. I went around back.

There was no one in the alley behind the Korean restaurant, Chou's store, or the pet shop. Moving to the middle door of the three, I put my ear to the jamb. Talking on the other side, occasionally rising to bursts of shouting.

A small, barred window was at head height next to the door. I looked through it.

Around a table that seemed to function as a desk, Lily Chou sat with the older man while Peter Chou paced and harangued at them. Happily, he used English, and enough carried through the glass to give more than the gist of his one-sided conversation. Of even more interest was the way the "stroke victim" passed the time as he seemed to ignore Peter's lecture.

The older man whittled with that pocket knife I'd seen, grasped now in his left hand while the right did just fine holding a hunk of wood securely.

I tried the back door quietly. Unlocked, probably to put trash out for the garbage truck I'd seen earlier.

Well, nothing ventured . . .

They were not pleased to see me. Peter picked up a sawed-off baseball bat, brandishing it more like a nightstick. The older man stood abruptly, the knife poised for close-in work.

Only Lily Chou stayed still, speaking first and briefly in Chinese, then in English. "Peter, put that down."

"This guy's got no right—"

"Peter," her voice resigned now, "it's over."

I said, "Not necessarily," but waited until Peter lowered the bat and the old man, at Lily's tugging on his sleeve, sat back down.

The young woman looked up at me, her head tilted to the side. "What do you mean by 'not necessarily'?"

Leaning against the wall, I said, "Your little charade. It may not have to stop."

Peter Chou didn't want to give up his bone. "You followed me back here, didn't you?"

"That doesn't matter now," said his sister. Then, to me, "How much do you know?"

"Enough, from standing out there while Peter laid it out in lavender."

Her brother didn't like that, but at least he didn't say so.

I came off the wall slowly, rolling my shoulders to take the fight-or-flight tension out of them. "Okay, here's what I do know. Sometime in the last three months, the owner of this store had a stroke, a massive one that left him functionally paralyzed."

Lily beat her brother to the punch. "People recover."

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"But, unfortunately, your father didn't. He died."

"That's not true," said Peter. "He's right here."

I looked at both males. "I saw a photo of your father, Peter. He was moving a chess piece, a very careful thing for him, I suspect, especially when he knew someone was aiming a camera at him."

"So?"

"So he was using his right hand, and this nice gentleman with the knife is left-handed."

The daughter shook her head.

I said, "Before he died, your father told you what he wanted to happen."

"He couldn't." Lily Chou looked back up at me, wearily. "After the stroke in February, our father couldn't talk. His mind was still there, but the stroke took away his ability to speak as well as move. All he could do was blink. Once for yes, twice for no. It took nearly a week of asking him questions before we could figure out what our father wanted us to do."

I glanced at the older man. "Does he have English?"

"Just a few words," said Lily.

Which made a "stroke" the perfect cover for not speaking. Or even understanding what people might say to him. "Who is he?"

"Our uncle."

I remembered something Henry Silverberg told me. "Your father's brother?"

"Yes. He stayed in China when our father came here. Uncle worked hard, saved his money. Our father wanted him to join us in the States for years, but Uncle wouldn't hear of it. Until this January, when things got really bad in his province and he wrote our father from China."

Peter chimed in again. "I went to the Immigration Service at the federal building here, to get information about it. They said under the new regulations, our father had to be earning over twenty thousand dollars a year in order to 'sponsor' our uncle." The son laced the word "sponsor" with contempt. "I was already a junior in college, and Lily a freshman. No way our father could show that kind of income from this little hole-in-the-wall."

The daughter said, "Our neighbors thought that was who you were."

"I'm sorry?"

She motioned toward the walls. "The people from the restaurant and the pet shop. We had to tell them what we were doing, and they rehearsed what to say if an Immigration officer ever showed up."

And I hadn't shown the neighbors any ID to dispel that impression. "But while your father didn't qualify as a sponsor, he was already a citizen himself."

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"Yes," said Peter Chou. "And proud of it. So, after his stroke, he came up with a plan."

Lily overrode her brother. "It was simple, really. Uncle had enough money to get here illegally, by boat. And he did, last month. Then our father . . ." She shook her head again.

Peter had to swallow, hard. "Our father decided to die, to give his brother his identity and therefore his citizenship, too—the chance here that 'our government' wouldn't provide."

I recalled Henry Silverberg's comment about quotas on Jews wanting to immigrate to America in the 'thirties. "I think once my client hears the whole story from me, he'll leave you in peace."

Lily Chou spoke as though she hadn't heard me. "After the stroke, our father willed his own death. He literally sacrificed himself so that Uncle could improve his position in life."

Looking into her eyes, I thought, "Chou's Gambit," but kept it to myself. ●

"HA, HA! VERY FUNNY, FIGLY. NOW PLEASE GET BACK TO YOUR DESK."

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NEXT ISSUE...

The Tinder Box
BY MINETTE WALTERS

In for a Penny
BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

Miracles! Happen!
BY DOUG ALLYN

The Global Man
BY CLARK HOWARD

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by Anne Regalia

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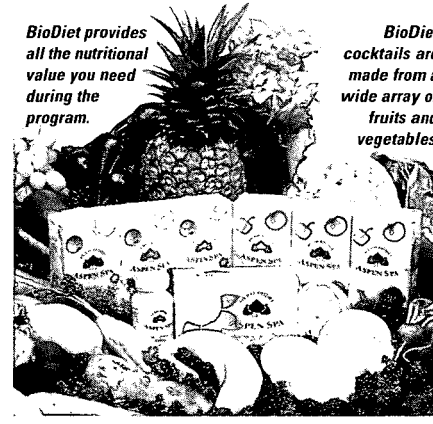

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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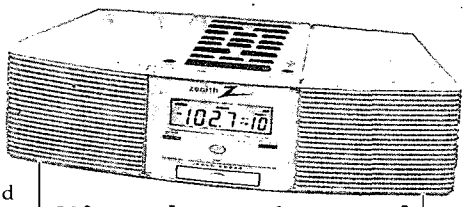

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